

# SOLUTION: The Patient Environment

One thing that commonly gets overlooked in your work to continuously improve the patient experience may be the environment that the patients, families, and your community experience when they enter your building for any reason.

We have done research on this topic and have conducted extensive research on our own. We know the vital importance of what the patient experiences through their senses when they are in your building. We cannot but help to notice when this is done extremely well, and attention is paid to the environment by some organizations, and when it is not by others .

In case you were thinking that this was going to be a major capital project involving architects and engineers - it is not! There are things an employee driven team passionate about improving the experience for BOTH the patients and fellow employees to improve the environment.

Please remember what the environment cannot do - It cannot replace hospitality, friendliness, courtesy, and respect from one human being to another. Physical space does not replace the core meaning of hospitality” the warm and generous reception of strangers as if they were family and friends”. A physical space cannot reassure anxious patients and family members about the quality of the care being provided.

## THE PHYSICAL SPACE CAN, HOWEVER PROVIDE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS:

- Welcoming
- Appears to value humans over technology
- Fosters a connection to nature and beauty. (Putting Patients First, Planetree)

Elevating the Patient Experience through consideration for the environment. Following are some considerations for you and your team to work on to improve the patient’s environment.

If you are reading this thinking “WOW - we do not take any of these things into consideration”. No worries! Remember, how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!



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JUST START improving. Everything you do will make a visible and tangible difference to your patients, their families and your community. Everything you will do will assist employees and provide for an improved work environment as well!

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

***“You never have a second chance to make a first impression”.***

More and more research is being done about the importance of a first impression when it comes to our lobbies and entryways. Make sure as you walk in the patient’s shoes to see what they see when they enter your building that all sidewalks and entryways are clearly marked and attractive with beautiful landscaping. An atrium is a common welcoming site when entering a healthcare facility, but the very first things to be seen are clearly visible instructions on “how to get places”. Modern architecture calls for the health library, and common meeting spaces for the community ,vs. A hospital gift shop which traditionally is found right inside the door.

Your first impression is both the people who work in the front lobby, such as valet and registration who know their role is to create a great first impression. The building itself should create a sense of welcome, and not frustration or fear.

We find that wayfinding is usually an afterthought in most organizations and is done after the space is designed (or when a problem is identified). Wayfinding is essential for patients (already anxious and afraid of being late) to feel a lack of frustration with your building. That wayfinding and great signage starts from the street and should be streamlined inside the building at every corner.

Lobbies, Elevators, Nursing Stations, and all intersections can be landmarked with easily identifiable marks such as a piece of art or sculpture and signage. When your patients and their families see the identifier, they think “ahhh, I was just getting lost, and here are more directions”. Kind of like a cairn on a hiking trail.

Wayfinding is always introduced with the concept of “taking people where they need to go”. Again, human interaction and comfort cannot be replaced by a great sign.



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## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WAITS.

You want your patient environment to reduce stress, not cause further stress. One major player in the stress of coming to your organization for care is waiting. The other considerations for your environment will include some items and ways you can decrease the effects of waiting, however this first one is key:

**Occupied Time feels shorter.** If you can give people something to do or distract their attention it will lessen their anxiety about the waits that just naturally occur in a healthcare organization of any kind. Provide them with television to watch, or music to listen to. Make sure WiFi is present for all guests to your waiting rooms. If infection control practices allow for this, provide reading materials. Fish tanks provide the double bonus of providing the healing effects of nature, but also provide something interesting to watch while waiting.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: ON STAGE, OFF STAGE

**Nature** - Nature and the feeling of being outdoors even when you are sick and cannot are extremely healing. Since the times of Florence Nightingale, healers knew the strength and pull of nature to we humans. Create a walking path between buildings and fill it with beautiful plants. Viewing nature can reduce blood pressure and tension, so windows and viewing are very important. Even if patient privacy cannot have an open window-glass blocks for filtered light are still healing.

**Spiritual** - A chapel is a place of peace and is welcoming to all when they are in need. Make sure your chapel is in a place of frequent foot traffic so that visitors to your facility see it and know they may use it.

**Age-specific** - Even if you do not have a pediatric department in your organization, it is important to have something in place that recognizes the age specific needs of the peds population. We called it “Peds in a box”, and my CNA’s unpacked pediatric specific needs and decor when we would get the word we had a pediatric patient coming from the ED or OR. Have bedside curtains in decor for peds in the OR, Med-Surg and the ED. Bedside curtains create the instant feel of a children’s room. We had a mural painted to interest children in one of our ED rooms. You would be surprised at the fact that local artists would love to donate their time in this way.

**Safety** - Your community needs to know that they are in a safe place, and that safety is a top priority for all who work there. As long as safety notices are well done, professional, and reassuring ( vs. cold and sterile) they can add to the homelike environment and welcoming atmosphere you are trying to create.



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**Cleanliness** - Shiny hallways, organized desks, clutter free spaces and lobbies all speak to an organization that has it all together. Research on patient trust indicate that the cleanliness and lack of clutter is key to healthcare decision making by family members. Have Spring and /or Fall cleaning events to de-clutter every nook and cranny. Remember, you have to be able to “see” clutter through the eyes of a patient and family member. Maybe have other departments round in your department. What do they see?

**Community/Cultural** - Your community and the culture and history of the community should be reflected in the halls of your organization. Remember, it is not just local community members who use your services. You will have visitors to the area, some of which may be physicians or others seeking employment. What does your building say about the community that is right outside the door. Your patient environment should match the community. My hospital where I served as a leader for 23 years is located on the shores of Lake Superior. When I was re-designing my ED space, I was not going to decorate with conch shells and tiki huts! ( although in the winter, my staff may have loved that!). The look and feel of our decor reflected the Great Lakes we are surrounded by.

**Green** - Having recycling available and putting focus on green energy saving initiatives speaks volumes to your employees and community. There is a lot of waste in healthcare- put your employee driven team to work reducing waste and shouting from the rooftops that you are an organization that cares about the world you live in.

**Learning Environment** - Healthcare libraries and patient services for learning are key to providing an environment where people can learn to care for themselves and others.

**Focus on The Senses to organize your patient environment** - It can be difficult for you to “see” your organization as a patient or family member does. After all, you live there. You may spend more time at work than you do at home! And, just like home you tend to stop noticing those things that others notice as soon as they enter your home.



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We recommend a “secret shopper” approach to inviting others into the hallways and patient care areas to give you feedback on how you can improve your patient environment. Organize the questions they will answer for you based on their “first impressions” , and by the senses. Some of our partners have their Patient Family Advisory Committee do this for them, and others have a secret shopping agreement with neighboring organizations.

- **Visuals** - Art, lighting, natural light, color. See resources for colors that heal, vs. harm. Make sure there is a consistent color palette through the organization that is appealing to the eye and matches. Art can be local artists, and consistent with the themes followed. We have one partner organization that had their employees provide all of the art, and it was done very well.
- **Sounds** - Music, laughter, white noise, minimizing disruptive/offensive noise. How will you know if noise is offensive unless you ask someone to evaluate it for you? It may be just “background “ to you, and others may be offended by it. We know of a hospital that placed running waters and fountains near places with offensive noises. Listen for too many overhead pages- they can be extremely anxiety provoking.
- **Touch** - is the furniture comfortable and functional? Is pet therapy available?
- **Scent** - *I have never noticed that a hospital has a certain odor, but others sure do!* Is there an odor in your organization? What is the cause? What can be done about it? We recommend volunteer bakers to create the scent of baking bread or cookies throughout the halls of your organization.
- **Taste** - Let’s face it people! Food is LIFE. We eat when we are stressed. It’s important to convey the message that healthy food is available. After all, you are a healthcare organization! We have seen instances of healthy vending machines throughout an organization ( or one in a central location ). The cafeteria needs to be open and welcoming as any other location is for visitors to easily navigate.



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In closing , please remember that likely your team of empowered and engaged employees cannot do a complete makeover on your patient environment. You can have a voice however and lend that voice for others who make decisions about the importance of capital expenditures to create a healing environment! Learn more about a healing patient environment and share that learning for improvements. We write this Solution merely to give you ideas to CASE and to open your mind to the possibilities of improvements that need to be made in your organization.

Have Fun and JUST START!

**Resources:**

[https://ovsco.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Healing\\_Colors.pdf](https://ovsco.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Healing_Colors.pdf)

<https://www.bdcnetwork.com/5-design-considerations-when-selecting-color-healthcare-facilities>

[https://continuingeducation.bnpmedia.com/article\\_print.php?L=222&C=928](https://continuingeducation.bnpmedia.com/article_print.php?L=222&C=928)

<https://psychcentral.com/blog/the-psychology-of-waiting-in-lines-8-reasons-that-the-wait-seems-long/>

Putting Patients First ; Designing and Practicing Patient Centered Care.Susan B. Frampton, Laura Gilpin, Patrick.A Charmel



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