

The Marriage of Form and Function:

Creating a Healing Environment



by Bonnie K. Litch

A revolution has occurred in how hospitals are being designed and constructed in the 21st century. With the advent of the Center for Health Design's Pebble Project and other efforts and studies, more institutions are looking for ways to bring together aesthetics and the mission of organizations to create a "healing environment" for both patients and staff. The fall 2004 issue of *Frontiers of Health Services Management* explored this topic, stating, "The old model of provider-centered care, for which most of the [hospital facilities] were designed, does not lend itself to the newer, more efficient model of patient-centered care." This movement recognizes the design elements that help reduce stress and promote safety and healing, while considering ecological issues. Two hospitals in the Midwest have taken these elements to heart.

Clarian West Medical Center— Starting From Scratch

When leaders at the Clarian West Medical Center in Avon, Ind., were charged with the task of building a new hospital, they started from scratch. What they ultimately created was an environment totally committed to healing and to patient-centered care.

Al W. Gatmaitan, FACHE, president and CEO of Clarian West, credits the following as critical to the construction of a "healing sanctuary." He says, "The key was integrating three ideas: a healing physical environment; the work of healthcare and the technology needed; and the relationships that must develop among patients, families and staff for healthcare to work well." To meet these goals, Gatmaitan and his team worked closely with the architects and designers to bring together elements such as natural light, colors, materials and elements of nature to help adapt hospital form to comfortably fit with healthcare function.

"We asked ourselves if there is a right way, a better way to provide healthcare," says Gatmaitan. "How do we create an environment to meet the high standards for quality and safety desired by our staff, the patients and the community?"

How do we make our hospital a place where people want to work? And, what kind of physical environment fosters better and more efficient care for patients while providing them a healing atmosphere?"

The result was a beautiful, functional 76-bed, suburban facility that married aesthetics to performance. Built on more than 70 acres, Clarian West is an institution designed specifically to take care of not just patients, but also their families and the caregivers who work there. "There is a growing body of research that draws a clear connection between environment and healing," says Gatmaitan. "Our goal was to be very intentional in creating an environment that enhances the work of our physicians and caregivers by helping them reduce anxiety and stress as well as to return some freedom of choice and control to our patients and their families. We feel so strongly about this notion of a 'healing sanctuary' that we adopted it as one of our core operating principles, right alongside other vital elements such as patient safety."

Advocate Lutheran General Hospital— Transforming an Aging Facility

Clarian West is not alone in embracing these principles. Renovations at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital (ALGH) in Park Ridge, Ill., are underway, transforming its 617-bed teaching hospital—originally built in 1959—into a facility to meet the needs of the community for the next 50 years. Plans for the newly renovated facility are already under construction and include 382,623 new and 30,612 renovated square feet and an eight-story building with 192 private rooms. Additional private rooms will be created in the existing hospital.

Ginger Barthel, FACHE, vice president for Clinical Operations, believes the success of any overhaul begins with a vision. ALGH's vision was to "create a facility that expands and enhances Advocate Lutheran General Hospital and Lutheran General Children's Hospital's leadership in providing quality healthcare to patients on a regional basis." To meet this goal, the organization developed a set of guiding principles that are divided

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into three different categories: patient safety goals; enhanced patient/family-centered care operations; and enhanced operational effectiveness and efficiencies.

To figure out how best to accomplish these principles, ALGH sought a greater understanding of its stakeholders' needs. "When developing our plans for renovations, we conducted several different focus groups to discover what elements they thought were critical to creating the right environment at ALGH," says Barthel. "We brought together physicians, nurses, patients and their families and support personnel; every stakeholder in our hospital. In the end, we held 300 separate meetings and had 162 consistently involved with the design process." Through these sessions, they found several common themes: privacy, comfort, security, safety, family-centered care and convenience. These aspects became the backbone of the renovations and construction.

Here are some elements both institutions believe are crucial to creating a healing environment:

Bring the Outside In

At Clarian West, the healing experience begins for patients before they walk through the door. The campus features walking trails, ponds and gardens, and the building has an abundance of windows, some more than three stories high, which bring soothing outdoor views and natural light to both public spaces and the all-private patient rooms. Light will play a key role at Advocate Lutheran, with room plans that include large picture windows that cover the entire wall. Patients will be able to control the amount of ambient light they receive through darkening shades.

Make Patient Privacy a Priority

Privacy is very important to a patient's healing environment, and both institutions reflect a commitment to this principle. "We don't have strangers in our rooms with us at home, so why would we be comfortable with that scenario when we are at our most vulnerable?" says Clarian West's Medical

Director James Fesenmeier, MD. That element of privacy also helps facilitate open, honest communication between the patient and his or her healthcare team.

Provide Hotel-Like Amenities

At Clarian, patient rooms feature home-like amenities such as flat-screen televisions, DVD players, Internet connections, over-the-bed reading sconces and artwork.

Designers at ALGH also believe that an engaging environment is important to helping the healing process. In addition to refreshments and entertainment, patients will be able to access educational tools in their rooms via the television. Phone and Internet connections will help them communicate with the outside.

Clarian West extended the hotel philosophy to its food service. Instead of a pre-selected tray of breakfast, lunch and dinner arriving for all patients at the same time every day, patients at Clarian West order from a diet-appropriate menu anytime between 6:30 a.m. until 7:30 p.m. "Room service has been an unqualified success," Gatmaitan explains. "In an environment where so many decisions are taken out of your hands and placed into the hands of experts, the ability to eat what sounds good when you're hungry is empowering. It also helps make mealtime an 'event' that serves as a positive distraction for the patient and their family."

Create Soothing Aesthetics

Clarian West paid particular attention to each detail, creating a soothing atmosphere from paint choices to the building materials. "The color palette is soothing and natural—a continued effort to bring the healing power of nature indoors," says Gatmaitan. "Building materials such as stone and slate complement the color palette and add texture, all of which affect the overall experience."

"True healing environments are constructed in ways that help patients and families cope with the stresses of illness,"

says Jain Malkin, a Clarian West consultant in the design of innovative healthcare environments. “Every decision—from lighting, layout and décor to heating and cooling—can further a patient’s healing. Whether we eliminate noise, provide pleasant music and imagery, or allow a patient privacy and more options for passing the time, we are providing a place where they can focus more on healing.”

Focus on Relationship-Centered Care

An important component of Clarian West’s healing philosophy is a commitment to relationship-centered care. As Gatmaitan states, “We believe that healthcare is completely delivered through a caregiver, and the technology involved is only a tool. Patient care is the result of a series of relationships throughout the day. Our success is judged by how we manage and interact with the patients.”

He offers an analogy. “Building high-tech equipment is complex, but every step in the process is a known entity. Hospitals, on the other hand, are unpredictable. There are some mechanized activities in a hospital environment (medication administration and food delivery, for example), but their success cannot be realized without an understanding of the human element in the process. The only way to work in a hospital environment is to concentrate on relationships and how everyone interacts. While engineering efficiencies are important to our design, creating an environment where we can build good relationships with quality caretakers while learning from our mistakes and the experience of others is equally as critical.”

Make Rooms Functional, But Not at Expense of Patient

Recognizing that the hospital setting is a complex series of communications and relationships, space is designed to anticipate how these communications occur and how the entities relate. At Clarian, patient rooms are all-private and considerably larger than the industry standard,

measuring 320 square feet including the bathrooms. The space includes a work zone for staff and a patient area with a flat-screen TV and refrigerator built into the casework. Headwalls have been placed to give patients a convenient view of the outdoors through the floor-to-ceiling windows. There also is a nursing alcove between every two rooms.

In addition, technology has been assimilated into the room unobtrusively at Clarian West. Computers and monitors are carefully placed for both patient and staff convenience, and the support/supply functions are hidden behind doors. Physicians and nurses can work comfortably without necessarily having to stand and can easily engage in conversations. There is an “onstage/offstage” approach in corridor and room planning so that patients and families do not see equipment and supplies being wheeled around. Sophisticated communication devices eliminate paging and other intrusions. “We try to put the intense work involved in delivering healthcare out of sight and out of mind,” says Gatmaitan.

Advocate Lutheran also will divide its rooms into specific spaces that have different purposes. “We will have a family zone, patient zone and staff zone to meet the needs of each group,” says Barthel. “Staff has convenient access to medical equipment and supplies that are out of sight of the patients. Medications will be locked in the room, eliminating the need for nurses to go somewhere else to get them. We believe that this efficiency will reduce medication error opportunity.” These features will help the hospital to meet one of its guiding principles—enhanced operational effectiveness and efficiencies. To meet this goal, they also will include a universal floor plate, standardized room layout, PCs in each room for electronic medical records documentation, nurse servers, decentralized nurses stations, cross corridors to ease access, floors

divided into modules, maintained line of sight, resident sleep rooms, positive and negative airflow rooms, and bariatric rooms.

Keep Staff Morale in Mind

Both institutions include special, out of the way places for staff to “decompress.” At ALGH, floors will have a tranquility room for staff in each unit with a recliner, soft music and turn-down lights. They have such a space in their existing hospital and found that it is a significant help in lifting staff morale. Clarian West also has found that it is important in reducing employee stress levels.

Remember the Family

At Clarian West, families who have a loved one in surgery are not tied to a designated surgery waiting room for the duration of the procedure, which can sometimes last several hours. Instead, they may choose to use a hospitality pager, which gives them the freedom to visit a variety of small waiting areas throughout the building, take a stroll through an outdoor garden or stop by the café for coffee and a bite to eat by the fireplace—all without the fear and stress that they might miss an opportunity for an update from a nurse or surgeon.

Don't Forget About Safety

As safety concerns are a key issue in the hospital environment, ALGH has given a great deal of thought to safety measures—from ensuring the physical safety of patients and staff to encompassing safety precautions in patient care. For example, access to patients and staff will be limited to pre-designated family and friends to help protect individuals from potentially dangerous situations. Patient bathrooms will include handrails and wheelchair accessible showers to help prevent falls. Besides reducing fall risk, Advocate Lutheran also has committed to several additional safety goals, including procedures for patient identification, communication effectiveness between caregivers, medication safety, nosocomial infection reduction and hand hygiene.

Outcomes

Now in its third year of operation, Clarian West's new building has been a tremendous success. The institution has made its financial targets, while embracing new designs and technology. More importantly, surveys during the last four quarters have shown a strong positive response from stakeholders. When asked if patients would recommend Clarian West, the institution has scored consistently in the top 25 percent, and it was in the top 10 percent for NRC+PICKER scores for inpatient care.

Clarian West has gone four quarters without a significant medication error in adult inpatient care and in the ICU. Hospital-wide, it has experienced a rate of one per 125,000 doses and improving.

In addition, employee satisfaction is high, with a top 10 percent score in a staff perception survey. Ninety-three percent of employees believe that the hospital invests in their future, and 95 percent say Clarian West is a great place to work. These figures are especially critical, as the organization does not use a recruitment firm. They are not the leader in pay, yet staff referral is the top source of new hires.

For Gatmaitan, these positive outcomes are not a surprise. “We don't think that we have just been lucky,” he says. “We found a perfect combination of technology, environment and relationships that have proven to be effective. We tell this story in our new employee orientation to help reinforce our organizational culture and the application of the concepts of science and engineering to the humanity of the work that we do. The risk of error exists. We don't hide our mistakes; we encourage staff to use them as a teaching experience.”

ALGH has been making great strides in its efforts to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)

certification on this project. It is one of a few hospitals in the Midwest to pursue this goal, which focuses on the sustainability and renewability of the environment through the use of renewable resources and incorporation of the many healing aspects of the design.

The hospital has been receiving positive responses to the plans of its new facility. It has created mock rooms for evaluation; and these full-size renditions of the new ICU and general care rooms allow all staff—from housekeepers to physicians—to provide input via surveys. Former patients and their families have toured the mock rooms and have been asked for their opinions. Reaching out to the “customers” has provided key suggestions to the design staff, and it has endeared the community to ALGH as it shows it truly cares what its constituents think.

From Barthel’s point of view, it makes good sense to bring patients into the process. “One of the patients we consulted was wheelchair bound and significantly visually impaired,” she says. “His suggestions on issues regarding distance, sound and accessibility were critical, as we would have never

thought of them on our own. We simply did not have his experiences in life to come up with these ideas.” Patient feedback, along with staff input, has allowed Barthel and her team to make changes throughout the design process.

For both organizations, design and function have been interlinked to create an atmosphere that inspires staff and promotes healing. And they feel that any additional cost for construction is an investment into the future of their organizations. As Gatmaitan says, “From a business standpoint, we believe that the incremental cost for implementing a design like this—and it can be fairly significant, as much as 10 percent to 15 percent more—will be amortized to virtual nonexistence over the anticipated life of the building and have a minimal impact on an annual income statement. Then there are cost savings that occur when incidence of falls and infection are reduced. But more importantly, we anticipate improved revenues from enhanced referrals and reduced cost for staff recruitment and retention. It is a win-win situation.”

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Pebble Project Update

The construction of Clarian West Medical Center was not the first time that Clarian Health Partners had dipped into design experimentation. The organization signed on to become one of the first Pebble Projects when it created a new cardiac care unit several years ago. The Pebble Project, an enterprise to implement and test elements of a healing environment, is the brainchild of the Center for Health Design (CHD). CHD is a research and advocacy organization of healthcare and design professionals who want to improve the quality of healthcare through building architecture and design. Launched in 2000, there are currently 37 projects across the country at this time. For more information, visit www.healthdesign.org/research/pebble.

