

# PREMIUM PRACTICE

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## The Premium Practice Experience

*Why Office Design Matters*



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# The Premium Practice Experience

## *Why Office Design Matters*

A soothing atmosphere for patients improves the working environment for staff, resulting in enhanced morale, better patient care, and a healing environment that enriches the business and reputation of the premium practice.

**BY CONNI BERGMANN KOURY, EXECUTIVE EDITOR**

It is well accepted that physical environment has important implications for the disease process. We accept that infection, for example, is a battle between microbes and the immune system's exposure to them via the environment.

Traditional medicine, however, is only now acknowledging the effect on the disease process of less measurable, nonphysical factors such as stress, according to Geimer-Flanders reporting in the *Cleveland Clinic Journal of Medicine*.<sup>1</sup> Many stressors have a bearing on the progression of disease and healing. As a result, experts believe it makes sense to view health care as a comprehensive approach to combating all of the factors that contribute to the disease state. According to Geimer-Flanders, the integration of therapies—peaceful and comforting surroundings, stress reduction, caring health care providers, and evidence-based medicine—creates a healing environment.

Clearly, current trends and research confirm that healing comprises much more than strictly the physical interaction between the doctor and the patient. This concept is a part of what a premium practice is all about—going beyond the basic core service elements of clinical care to deliver an outstanding all-around experience to the patient.

### THE ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENT: LOW STRESS, HIGH COMFORT

Since the 1990s, physical environment has taken on new importance in the setting of a consumer-oriented health care system.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the general appearance of a medical facility, office, or hospital has an important effect on patients. A report from *The Journal of Healthcare Management*<sup>2</sup> noted that the importance of setting is most thoroughly understood by those who view their customers as guests, such as the guest service industry. Myron D. Fottler, PhD, lead author of the article, wrote, "An excellent healing environment will reinforce excellent clinical quality, but an inferior environment can detract from fine clinical care." Dr. Fottler is professor and director of Health Services Administration Programs, College of Health and Public Affairs, University of Central Florida, Orlando. He continued: "One of the most important principles learned by the guest service industry is to provide the setting customers expect. Another is to create an environment that meets or exceeds customer needs for safety, security, support, competence, and physical and psychological comfort."

Patients, of course, have different backgrounds and cultures, but a unifying concept is that the design of a



(All photographs courtesy of Salvatore M. DeCarlo, Jr. MD, Founder/Chief Medical Director)

**Figure 1.** The offices of Viso Lasik Medspas in Palm Beach, Florida, offer a full-service, state-of-the art LASIK vision correction facility with a commitment to vision excellence.

medical facility should promote low stress and high comfort (Figure 1). An investigation by the Center for Health Design, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization, showed that the more appealing the environment, the higher the perceived quality of care and the lower the patient's anxiety.<sup>3</sup> The researchers found a significant relationship between perceived waiting times (which are affected by the pleasantness and aesthetics of waiting areas) and perceived quality/perceived anxiety.<sup>3</sup> Patients underestimated longer ( $\geq 30$  minutes) actual waiting times and overestimated short (0-5 minutes) actual waiting times. There was no significant relationship between actual waiting times and perceived quality or perceived anxiety. The investigators said these findings suggests that perceived waiting times, which are strongly influenced by the physical design of the environment of care, are a more important determinant of patients' satisfaction.

Research into the setting of medical care is proliferating, and efforts to promote enhanced health care through design are ongoing at a number of centers. The Pebble Project, for example, is a joint research effort between the Center for Health Design and individual health care providers.<sup>3</sup> The project, launched in 2000, is

charged with "creating a ripple effect in the health care community to provide research and documented examples of health care facilities whose design has made a difference in the quality of care."<sup>3</sup> It should also be noted that design-related improvements could translate into improved financial success for the institution.<sup>3</sup>

A related initiative is the Optimal Healing Environments (OHE) Program, a primary research project of the Samueli Institute, a nonprofit medical research organization supporting the scientific investigation of healing processes and their application to health and disease.<sup>4</sup> The program seeks to determine how theory about optimal health care translates into real-world clinical practice. An OHE is one in which all aspects of patients' care—physical, emotional, spiritual, behavioral, and environmental—are optimized to support and stimulate healing. According to the program, building such spaces is one important approach of the OHE Program, launched in 2005.

### DESIGNING THE PREMIUM PRACTICE Efficient, Flexible Plans

Eckert Wordell in Kalamazoo, Michigan, is an architecture, engineering, and interior design firm founded

in 1984 by Jeff Eckert and Rick Wordell. The firm has completed a wide range of projects and has vast experience in health care. It has designed new facilities, built additions, and created interior and exterior spaces (Figures 2 through 5). Having completed projects all across the country, Eckert Wordell focuses on providing efficient, flexible plans that can adapt to the changing demands of the health care field while paying close attention to the atmospheric and emotional

aesthetics of the built space. According to the company's Web site, the result is a soothing atmosphere for patients and an improved working environment for the staff (see *The Four S's: the Relationship Between Space and Productivity*). In turn, workers' morale is boosted, enhancing the quality of patients' care and promoting a healing, compassionate environment that enriches the business and reputation of the premium practice.

## THE FOUR S'S: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPACE AND PRODUCTIVITY

### Style + Staff + System + Space = the Four S's

*"We developed the concept of the Four S's when we noticed that space had a significant impact on productivity."*

—Richard C. "Dick" Haines, Jr, Medical Design International

**(1) Style** is the physician's own working style. We can suggest design elements that can enhance his or her way of working.

**(2) Staff** has two parts to consider. One is to make sure you have staff to delegate to and that you understand what you can and should delegate. The second is that, if you can see five patients an hour, the staff has to be able to handle more than five patients an hour. This may mean sometimes the staff is idle—but not the doctor. "It's amazing how many times we see the nurses running around like crazy and the doctor has time on his hands. You want it the other way around."

**(3) Systems** have a lot to do with communication. We look for other ways to transmit information between the doctor and the technicians and nurses, like a light visual system, checklists, or a white board.

**(4) Space** is about making sure the doctor has enough space to manage patients well. You simply need to have enough exam rooms. We start by making sure the doctor has adequate space to go from patient to patient, and the rest of the staff can manage the other issues.

*Richard C. "Dick" Haines, Jr, is founder and president, Medical Design International, an Atlanta-based medical facility planning and design firm that has been in business for more than 20 years and has served more than 3,000 clients.*

### Some of Medical Design International's ophthalmology clients include:

- Alexandria Eye & Laser Center (Michael Redmond, MD)
- Altos Eye Physicians, Los Altos, California (David F. Chang, MD; Robert B. Matthews, MD; and Charles R. Whitney, MD)
- Associated Eye Physicians and Surgeons, Ltd, Saint Paul, Minnesota (Evan A. Ballard, MD; Douglas J. Carlson, MD; Honora E. Kennedy, MD; Stephen S. Lane, MD; and James E. Standefer, MD)
- Gimbel Eye Centre, Calgary, Alberta, Canada (Howard V. Gimbel, MD)
- Halifax Eye Associates, Daytona Beach, Florida (Harold Kushner, MD, and Alan Spertus, MD)
- Houston Eye Associates, Houston, Texas (John D. Goosey, MD, and Jack T. Holladay, MD)
- Kraff Eye Institute, Chicago (Manus C. Kraff, MD; Cheryl Kraff-Cooper, MD; William Lissner, MD; and Karen Orlin-Kraff, MD)
- Shepherd Eye Center, Las Vegas (John R. Shepherd, MD, and Jose H. Vidal, MD)
- The Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland (George Baerveldt, MD; Robert E. Foster, MD; Froncie A. Gutman, MD; Gregory S. Kosmorsky, DO; Roger H. Langston, MD; Hilel Lewis, MD; Careen Y. Lowder, MD; David M. Meisler, MD; Sanford M. Meyer, MD; Edward J. Rockwood, MD; and Kenneth W. Wright, MD)

*Adapted with permission from the January/February 2002 issue of Physicians Practice.*



### Quality of the Healing Environment

Associate Katie Jacobs, AIA, LEED AP, told “Premium Practice Today” that Eckert Wordell firmly believes that the design of a medical facility plays a pivotal role in the quality of the health care environment.

“Emotional aesthetics define the way you feel when you walk into a space,” Ms. Jacobs said. “We have all been in spaces that make us feel uncomfortable, even though we may not be able to articulate why (that table in the very center of the restaurant, for example). Part of our role as architects and interior designers is to understand this emotion and be able to create spaces that are aesthetically pleasing to the users both visually and emotionally (concepts which go hand in hand). This is especially critical in a health care environment, where people tend to be slightly anxious and may even be quite sick.” (See *Action Framework for Creating a Healing Environment*.)

“We strive to make the proportions of a space, the

(Courtesy of Eckert Wordell.)



Figure 2. The proportions of a space, the material used, the color palette, and a layering of design elements work together.

### ACTION FRAMEWORK FOR CREATING A HEALING ENVIRONMENT

#### Meeting the Patient’s Needs for Safety, Security, and Support

Goals and Objectives	Actions
The facility creates a positive first impression when the patients arrives.	Create a clean, beautifully landscaped exterior with an entryway that has an abundance of greenery, artwork, and natural lighting.
The patient finds the facility easy to use and understand.	Provide signage that is easy to read, clear, and located in obvious places that direct and teach people how to find their way. Spatial layout should be designed so people know where they are.
The patient feels safe and secure.	Provide a bright, smiling staff who make eye contact with patients and well-lit parking facilities and pathways.
Staff make patients feel welcome and valued.	Make sure staff are properly trained and that they create a positive environment.

#### Meeting the Patient’s Needs for Competent Care, Physical and Psychological Comfort

Goals and Objectives	Actions
The patient feels that the clinical service was excellent.	Humanize high-tech spaces where care is provided. Design workspaces that allow the caregiver to be in direct sight of the patient.
The patient feels physically comfortable in the facility.	Provide an organized, pleasant-smelling environment with appropriate temperature control, humidity, and furniture.
The patient feels psychologically comfortable.	Provide a soothing décor in all rooms with wall colors and floor colors that reduce stress and create a positive reaction from the senses.

Adapted from Fottler MD, Ford RC, Roberts V, Ford EW, Spears JD Jr. *Creating a healing environment: the importance of the service setting in the new consumer-oriented health care system.* J Healthcare Manage. 2009;45(2):91-105.

(Courtesy of Eckert Wordeil.)



**Figure 3.** Health care environments can reduce stress by including things such as views of nature, natural light, soothing colors, and therapeutic sound.

materials used, the color palette and a layering of design elements work together to create a comfortable, healing environment,” Ms. Jacobs said.

### Wayfinding

Another important aspect of the patient’s comfort in an office space has to do with “wayfinding”—knowing where to go and how to get around a building. “Wayfinding is really important to the patient’s emotional well-being when they enter a place they are unfamiliar with,” Ms. Jacobs explained. “Our designs revolve around clear circulation pathways and intelligent ordering of spaces, all meant to enhance a patient’s (and staff’s) experience.

### Premium Experience

The trend toward providing a certain patient population with a more upscale (premium) experience began with LASIK, Ms. Jacobs observed. “Separating LASIK patients from the general clinic population was often a strategy that our clients wanted to employ to provide a higher-end experience,” she said. “The levels of integration between clinic and refractive patients is always something we discuss when laying out a building. Some clients want their refractive patients completely separated when they walked in the door. Others only wanted them separated on procedure day. Still others did a blend.”

The development of office-based procedural suites, where surgeons can perform premium IOL procedures,

likely lend themselves to this level of attention, she said.

“We have seen greater attention paid to these patients after they have seen the physician and it has been determined that cataract surgery is necessary,” Ms. Jacobs said. “Surgery scheduling has become a much longer process, as in some practices the schedulers are responsible for explaining the different IOL options. In our minds this is where the catering can begin, for example, a plush waiting space outside the scheduler’s office, more schedulers to decrease waiting times for patients, etc.”

Depending on the patient base of the practice as well as the sophistication of the client, new high-tech toys and gadgets can be used in patients’ waiting spaces. “High-end plastics suites, the new aesthetic suites, and refractive clinics definitely cater to the ‘techies’ and often have available Wi-Fi, Internet stations, and other gadgets,” Ms. Jacobs said. “We have definitely seen a shift in program need here as the premium IOLs have advanced in popularity. We may also begin to see a trend toward higher-end ophthalmic ambulatory surgery centers as premium IOLs continue to gain popularity.”

## USING ARCHITECTURE TO MAXIMIZE EFFICIENCY

### Organization

A poorly organized building can quickly become a bottleneck to even the most competent staff, said Ms. Jacobs. She explained that many space-planning principles can help increase efficiencies in the ophthalmic setting, including a basic theory of patient flow known as the *linear flow* model.

According to Ms. Jacobs, in traditional ophthalmic flow, the patient is escorted from the reception room into an exam lane, where the technician works up him or her. During this time, the patient’s eyes are dilated, so he or she has to sit in a subwaiting area for the drops to take effect. Then, the patient is escorted back into the exam lane to be seen by the physician.

“This model taxes the exam lanes, resulting in larger-than-necessary, fully equipped yet underutilized

## STEPS IN PROVIDING A HEALING ENVIRONMENT

1. Evaluate the current environment
  - analyze your clinical setting
  - seek input from patients, patients' families, etc., concerning ambient conditions, spatial use, signs and symbols, and staff through interviews and focus groups
  - take action to improve and upgrade deficient aspects of the practice setting
  - measure patients' reaction to the setting and take action to improve deficiencies on a continual basis
  
2. Provide a welcoming environment
  - train front desk staff in customer relations, encourage them to display a pleasant demeanor
  - provide a high level of patient safety and security with outside lighting, low hedges, etc.
  - make it easy for patients to go where they want to and know where they are
  
3. Design the "healthscape"
  - develop a well-defined theme that is reinforced by all design elements
  - use warm colors and comfortable furniture
  - identify colors and style that patients find soothing
  - use technology to engage patients in learning about their health
  
4. Create a healing environment
  - create an environment of comfort, convenience, safety, entertainment, and information
  - review and upgrade signage to orient patients
  - study dispositions and preferences of patients before making changes
  - keep environment clean, organized, pleasant smelling, accessible to light, quiet. Maintain appropriate temperature and humidity

*Adapted from Fottler MD, Ford RC, Roberts V, Ford EW, Spears JD Jr. Creating a healing environment: the importance of the service setting in the new consumer-oriented health care system. J Healthcare Manage. 2009;45(2):91-105.*

rooms," Ms. Jacobs explained. "It can also create traffic jams and long waiting times as technicians and physicians battle for space. The end result is a limitation on the number of patients that a practitioner can see in the space, due primarily to the arrangement of the physical environment."

### Linear Flow

In the linear flow scenario, the workup functions are carried out in separate workup rooms.

"The benefit is an increase in the utilization rate of the exam rooms, allowing the physician to see more patients in a given period of time," Ms. Jacobs said. The linear flow method relies on a linear progression of the various parts of the examination. Together with this should be the layout of the rooms in which these functions take place. "The basic arrangement should progress as follows: reception desk for check-in, waiting room, workup room(s), subwaiting room, exam room," she said. "The individuality of the practice emerges in the way that special testing, surgical scheduling, and patient education are incorporated into the footprint." These spaces need to be positioned where they make the most sense for any given practice. She added that, for maximum efficiency, the circulation path linking all of these functions needs to be straightforward: "One significant premise of linear flow is the idea that the physician—not the technician—should be the 'bottleneck' of the process."



(Courtesy of Eckert Model)

**Figure 4.** An important aspect of the patient's comfort in an office space has to do with "wayfinding"—knowing how to get around a building.



(Courtesy of Eckert Wordell.)

**Figure 5. Designs that revolve around clear circulation pathways and intelligent ordering of spaces enhance the patient's and staff's experiences.**

According to Ms. Jacobs, the physician should be able to bounce back and forth between two exam lanes (and possibly a third) all day with no waiting time in between.

### Efficiency Enhances Patients' Satisfaction

"Additional benefits of linear flow beyond space and equipment have to do with patient satisfaction," Ms. Jacobs said. "With enough workup rooms, technicians can very efficiently work up patients and get them to the subwait areas more quickly, regardless of whether the physician is running on time or not." She noted that patients often wait in the main reception room for less than 5 minutes before they are called by the technician, making them feel as if they have begun their examination. Even though the patients still might not see the doctor for 40 to 45 minutes, in their minds they are in the system and the exam process has begun. She also pointed out that this higher rate of turnover at the front end of the examination process will create a needed shift in where the waiting chairs are located. In this scenario, more chairs would be placed toward the back of the building, in the area for dilation, versus the front of the building at the main reception.

Linear flow can be universally applied in some form or other to almost every subspecialty and every physician mix, including those with an optometric component, Ms. Jacobs asserted. "The practice must be willing to adapt to the new model for it to work properly, but there is no doubt that incorporating this into a

practice will yield a more efficient process, resulting in more satisfied patients, staff, and a boost in the bottom line," she said.

### SUMMARY

Healing means different things to different people (see *Steps in Providing a Healing Environment*). Studies that have tried to determine a definition to the word found that healing was associated with such themes as wholeness, narrative, and spirituality.<sup>5</sup> Egnew wrote, "Healing is an intensely personal, subjective experience involving a reconciliation of the meaning an individual ascribes to distressing events with his or her perception of wholeness as a person."

A therapeutic relationship between the patient, the physician, the staff, and the environment allows for a purposeful, goal-directed relationship that guides care that is in the patients' best interest and results in optimal outcomes. The shared medical setting must also reflect the values, beliefs, and philosophies of the patients served. Donna Bednarski, MSN, RN, wrote that specific things in health care environments can reduce stress, including views of nature, natural light, soothing colors, noise levels, privacy, and therapeutic sound.<sup>6</sup>

Many medical practices that are striving to be premium do not offer an environment such as that described herein. There is no better time than now for premium practices to ensure that they present to patients a setting that integrates peaceful and comforting surroundings, stress reduction, caring health care providers, and evidence-based medicine for optimal wellness and satisfaction. ■

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