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Updated hospital gowns a good investment, execs say, restore 'dignity'

While bottom line impact may be tough to measure, patients just want their own bottoms covered.

Chuck Green
(/news/author/2621)
(/news/author/2621)



Updated hospital gowns by PatientStyle are starting to replace the dreaded, bottom-bearing ones.

The arrival of reinvented hospital gowns is creating quite the stir at Park Nicollet Methodist Hospital in Minnesota after a the system decided to ditch the hated, backside-baring gowns for a newer model.

"When I walk around the hospital, people ask if we have the new gowns yet. There's a real buzz and excitement," said Christa Getchell, president of the Park Nicollet Foundation. "You wouldn't think a gown could do that, but it has."

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The decision to introduce new gowns at Park Nicollet came after the hospital took stock of its current gowns, as well as bedding, towels, socks and pillows through a study, said Getchell, who is also vice president of Park Nicollet Health Services. The patient focus group pulled no punches when it came to the gowns: They were uncomfortable and showed too much skin. "We wanted to restore patients' dignity," she said.

Park Nicollet isn't the first hospital to revamp gowns. In fact, it may be jumping on a growing trend.

The Cleveland Clinic (/directory/cleveland-clinic) began working with designer Diane von Furstenberg in October of 2008, according to Jeanne Murphy, executive liaison and lead on the patient gown initiative there, to redo its gowns. The clinic had been working on re-designing the gown for about two years prior to the partnership, with an emphasis on providing patients with a unique, high quality, comfortable gown that provided "dignified coverage for improved modesty," as well as ease of access for medical examination, said Murphy.

"The comfort and quality of the gowns was noticed immediately. Patients like the soft feel of the fabric," she continued.

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Of course, that's important to children as well. "We've gotten a great response to the new designs from parents," said Jeffrey Bienstock, M.D., director of Pediatrics at The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, New Jersey. "They love the cute designs and seem to like being able to wear something comfortable and familiar that reminds them of their own pajamas," he said of the gowns, though the investment added to the hospital's expenses. "Anything that can reduce the stress associated with a hospitalization for children and their families is wonderful."

At Henry Ford Hospital's Innovation Institute, a branch of Henry Ford Health System, The Henry Ford Model G patient gown, among other items, is being invented and designed, said Mike Forbes, product designer and licensing associate. The Innovation Institute focuses on validating designs from cost, safety and clinician standpoints, Forbes said. For the last two and a half years, the reinvented gown was used in two areas of Henry Ford Hospital, transplants and cardiology units, he continued. Since April, it's been utilized throughout the system, said Forbes.

With the Model G, designers sought to end the practice of patients having to wear two gowns, one in front and one is back, to keep from exposing their backsides. "(Double gowning) means we're allocating two products to one patient when you should be allocating one. By using two, you're purchasing two gowns because one doesn't do the job, which costs money."

Speaking of money, quantifying the savings in healthcare sparked by the reinvented gowns can be sticky, he said. "What value can you place on the patient experience for a health system? We're looking at data we're gathering from our upcoming surveys to better assess those questions. What are hospitals willing to pay and what's cost effective?"

However, Henry Ford saw a "dramatic increase" in the patient experience and scores when patients where asked how they felt about the hospital overall, said Forbes, which, at a time when quality rating affect reimbursement

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(/directory/reimbursement) rates, can help with the bottom line.

Nylon snaps are used on the Model G rather than using ties, which are hard to tie and usually get cut or ripped during emergencies, he said. Worse are metal snaps, which interfere with MRIs, CT Scans and X-Rays, added Forbes. Nylon snaps eliminate the need to transition patients out of gowns, easing the process for them as well as clinicians, he continued.

"While the new hospital gowns are more expensive than traditional hospital gowns, Cleveland Clinic feel it's important its patients are comfortable and feel they're covered," said Murphy. It's difficult to measure the impact of the hospital gown, he added, since the clinic didn't independently evaluate their impact on patient satisfaction.

Forbes, however, cautioned about costs.

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"The last thing an institution needs is a more expensive hospital gown," he said. "You need to weigh the options: how much are you spending putting two gowns on one patient?" There are also laundry costs to consider, he said, since laundry is washed by the pound. "If you're washing twice as many gowns as you need, you're spending twice as much money as you need on laundry. If we can design one gown that uses less fabric than two, it saves money on laundry and you won't have double gowning."

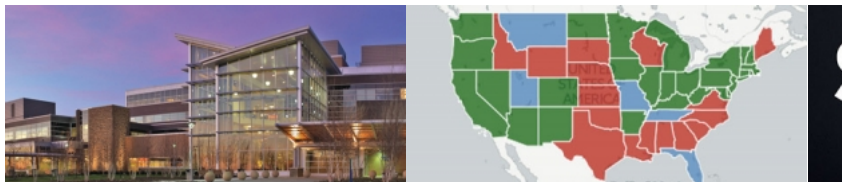
Also, if the gown is more durable, it will last longer.

Another dividend of the reinvented gowns, said Getchell, is that her facility is veering from how things had been done, displaying innovation and a cutting edge concept. "Most important, you're putting patients in an equal conversation with physicians. You're coming to a place of dignity so you can work with each other."

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