

A Case Study:

Designing Hope, Health and Healing



Trititas waiting area filled with natural light

Providing a patient environment designed to impart wellness and comfort in all dimensions—physical, emotional and spiritual—is as vital to cancer care as the finest medical professionals and latest technologies. Studies show that a range of environmental factors have a powerful healing and therapeutic effect on patients. Natural light, pleasant views, music, artwork and use of particular colors have each been shown to be instrumental in promoting relaxation, reducing stress, speeding recovery and enhancing patient satisfaction.

The notion that physical surroundings can positively affect patient outcomes is not a new one. In ancient times, patients sought to restore harmony amidst the healing surroundings of nature, art and music at temples to the Greek God Aesculapius. Similarly, people made pilgrimages for centuries to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to immerse themselves in the curative colors of exotic blooms. Even Florence Nightingale asserted the therapeutic effects of direct sunlight, bright-colored flowers and a peaceful, restful environment.

Today, health care's long history of being intertwined with spirituality is coming of age through purposefully designed "healing" environments that respect the vital linking of mind, body and spirit. AOC Oncology has been committed to this approach since it was part of Aptium Oncology, which opened the first cancer center in the network at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center over 20 years ago. Although each of the cancer centers in the network has its own unique physical layout, they have all been designed to achieve the patient-centered environment that is the foundation of the clinical model that Aptium advanced.

Patient-Centered, Supportive Spaces

“The design we provide for our clients needs to be about wellness and health, not sickness,” says Myra Fouts, principal of AOC Consulting. “We’re striving for design features that help patients and their families better cope with illness and feel more in control.” The availability of natural light and plenty of windows helps impart a warmer, less institutional ambience. Studies show that the artificial light typically found in many health care settings may dull the senses, while adding to visual and emotional stress. Conversely, “daylight” can significantly reduce fatigue and depression.

Privacy and personalized service are important too. For this reason, many leading-edge cancer centers provide valet parking and private treatment spaces with personal comfort zones that allow temperature, lighting and airflow to be adjusted according to patient preference. Minimizing noise is another priority. There is some evidence that noise can increase both a patient’s perception of pain as well as the use of pain medication. Noise also contributes to distress and sleep deprivation, which can lead to disorientation. To that end, cancer centers can benefit from carpeted waiting areas and acoustical tiling throughout their facilities.

“Ideally, in the future, all cancer centers will have separate patient and staff zones,” adds Fouts. “Design elements such as these not only enhance the patient experience, but also have a significant influence on the attitude and ability of staff to provide effective patient care.”

The ‘Trinitas Experience’

Fouts points to the Trinitas Comprehensive Cancer Center in New Jersey as an example of a patient-centered facility. She worked with architects to design the center, which has made huge strides in healing-focused, patient-centered care by going through great lengths to create a comfortable, soothing environment.

Fouts and the center shared a common belief that the patient’s experience is the heart of the center.

This conviction guided each stage of the 30,000-square-foot facility’s design and served as the inspiration for every detail of the Trinitas center, inside and out. “Cancer diagnosis, treatment and survivorship are incredibly taxing, both physically and emotionally,” says Fouts. “Our goal was to minimize the negative effects. Patients with cancer have enough to worry about without having to think about parking their car, being able to get work done during treatment, or feeling comfortable and at ease.”

To that end, every aspect of the center’s design is completely patient-centric. “Patients don’t have to travel far within the center to get to wherever they need to be,” says Fouts, “plus great care was taken, from a layout perspective, to eliminate confusion and keep everything in the center’s design proximal and intuitively logical.” The “Trinitas experience” begins when patients drive up to the center. Each patient is greeted by a parking valet, then taken to the registration desk by the concierge. Following registration, the registrar escorts the patient to

the appropriate department, where the receptionist takes over.

Aesthetics are yet another aspect of Trinitas' patient-centered environment, which more closely resembles a fine hotel than a hospital or treatment center. The center's reception, waiting and patient areas are decorated with an abundance of plants, warm woods, nice carpeting and comfortable seating. Newspapers are provided and nutrition areas are conveniently located throughout the center, allowing patients and their families to enjoy coffee, tea, hot cocoa, juices and snacks while they wait. The center also has wireless Internet access and laptops available for patients to work or use email. "Patients like being able to stay productive and connect with family and friends while they're waiting.

Great care was also taken in the design of the infusion areas. All have natural light for a brighter, more cheerful atmosphere. Each infusion space is private and includes a television, temperature and lighting control, comfortable chairs, room for a family member or friend, and a bed if patients prefer to lie down during treatment.

Clearly, Trinitas' efforts have paid off. The center has earned multiple 99th percentile rankings in Press Ganey Patient Satisfaction Surveys. Trinitas attributes these overwhelmingly positive results to their tremendous staff and the culture of customer service excellence that guides each team member.