The New Waiting Room: A Healthcare Asset

By Robert L. Titzer

Ever waited in your own waiting room? Ever sat in a crowded row of chairs against a bare white wall, leafing through a tattered magazine, before another long wait in a stark examination room? What impression does that experience leave on your patients? Do they care?

Answer: Yes. Studies show that patients do care about the medical office environment and that a pleasant waiting room can make all the difference in how they perceive your practice. Long a neglected stepchild of medical office design, the waiting room is receiving overdue attention.

Increasingly, physicians recognize that the waiting room affects not only consumer perceptions, but also business efficiency and even health outcomes.

Until recently, physician practices had little motivation to focus on the waiting room; quality of care was the highest priority. However, today’s consumers expect more than just competency. Medical practitioners are beginning to act like retailers, which have long invested heavily in store design to influence consumer attitudes and behavior.

Superficial as it may sound, in today’s image-driven marketplace, patients are more likely than in the past to judge a physician’s abilities by the look of the waiting area. Dinged doors, dirty flooring, worn seating and dog-eared magazines can suggest that cleanliness is not important and a physician’s skills are not current—negative perceptions that can undermine patients’ trust.

Building “healing environments”

Conversely, studies attest to the positive effect of the “healing environment,” a concept that emerged as a concept in hospitals in the 1990s and has recently taken hold in medical office design. For example, a patient’s blood pressure tends to be higher when measured in a doctor’s office than at home, reflecting the anxiety many patients feel during even a routine check-up.

Because doctor visits are stressful for many patients regardless of their condition, decor matters more in medical offices than in most other types of commercial space. Research shows that elements as simple as light and colors affect patients’ responses to treatment.

“The Arts of Healing,” a 1999 study published by the American Medical Association, showed that, in an in-patient facility, psychologically appropriate art substantially affected outcomes such as blood pressure, anxiety, intake of pain medication and length of hospital stay. Healthcare interior designers have since
been developing a patient-focused aesthetic that leads to better results for patients and healthcare organizations alike.

**Focusing on medical office décor**
A comfortable environment encompasses not only artwork, but also furnishings, lighting, seating arrangements and even reading material. Residential furniture and softer lighting are more attractive than corporate, providing a relaxing, home-like ambience.

Whereas fluorescent lights can make even healthy people appear somewhat ill, table lamps or diffused incandescent lights are warmer and more pleasing. Peaceful nature references, such as a fish tank, windows and pleasant outdoor views, plants or landscape paintings, are highly preferred by consumers, according to a 1997 joint study by The Center for Health Design and The Pickler Institute.

Our firm works with an art consultant to help decorate properties we develop and manage. In a Northwest Indiana medical office building, for instance, we hung landscapes of the Indiana Dunes, evoking a day at the beach rather than a visit to the doctor. It’s a far cry from a traditional waiting room with minimal decor, or one that simply reflects the physician’s interest in golf or fly-fishing.

Again, studies have found that patients feel most relaxed and comfortable when the medical office décor mimics what they might find at home. A sterile corporate atmosphere or quirky artistic setting can create unease among patients already feeling the anxiety that naturally accompanies a visit to a medical facility.

**Experimenting with spatial configurations**
As waiting room décor has evolved, designers are experimenting with spatial configurations that improve workflow and the patient experience. Traditional medical office buildings house physician practices with individual waiting rooms; new facilities may have a central waiting room on each floor that is open to the common corridor, generally with separate check-in and waiting sub-areas for patients seeing different specialists.

For example, Loyola University Health System decided on a central waiting area for each floor in its new Loyola Outpatient Center in Maywood, Ill., a four-story, state-of-the-art facility offering access to 14 clinical departments. Cozy seating areas create privacy zones for patients and families while providing abundant natural light near expansive windows and corridor areas that allow patients to move about, stretch their legs, and enjoy diverse views while waiting.

Furnishings are practical and durable, but stylish enough to emphasize comfort; natural light and outdoor views add to the relaxed environment. In addition to providing a more open and pleasing environment than a traditional waiting room, these common waiting areas serve an important practical function.

Without walls, open waiting areas allow patient volume to grow and shrink from one area to another. When one specialty is having a busy day, it can “borrow” waiting capacity from adjacent specialties. Flexible waiting space helps maximize utilization of the medical facility, producing higher returns from every square foot constructed and brick-and-mortar dollar invested because little space is wasted.

As consolidation continues among healthcare providers, consumers increasingly are seeking providers most able to focus on their specific needs. Thoughtful waiting room design not only provides comfort, but also can help a practice’s bottom line. That is a comforting thought for medical practitioners as well.

Robert L. Titzer, executive vice president, HSA PrimeCare, works with clients such as The University of Chicago, Ingalls Health System, Central DuPage Hospital, McCormick Theological Seminary, Advocate Healthcare and Fitness Formula Clubs. In addition, he develops leasing strategies for the HSA PrimeCare portfolio of medical office properties in Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. He can be reached at 312-332-3555 or rtitzer@hsacommercial.com.