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SUMMARY

Three small design updates to the medical office—lighting, painting, and a simple furniture swap—can be done slowly, over time, and can create lasting changes patients will love.

Key Words

healthcare interior design; medical office, healthcare design, waiting rooms, healthcare interiors

INTRODUCTION

I recently read a blog post by Seth Godin. It made me think of you, the healthcare professional, and your medical practice. Here's Godin's blog post:

There's nothing in the dentist's office that was there fifty years ago. Every device, every compound, every technique has been changed. Bit by bit. Involving thousands of people and organizations. Improvements large and small (mostly small), in every corner. And every one of those improvements was met with resistance. Every change was fought, tooth (!) and nail. Everyone had critics and skeptics and hold outs. That's how the world changes. By drips. Persistent, generous, tiny drips.¹

SUMMARY

This made me think of your practice—your waiting room, exam, and treatment rooms and, really, your entire office, or clinic. By making little design changes consistently, you enhance and improve the experience of your staff and patients every day. Let me repeat that a different way. By making little design changes consistently over time, you change the world, making people feel better with every design drop. It's hard to quantify your small design improvements in the same way it's hard to know how many single drops of water it will take to fill your cup.

We're so used to seeing big and grand displays of change in our lives, on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media.

And sometimes those big grand displays of design improvements you might see on Pinterest can feel a bit intimidating. You might wonder how you're going to be able to afford those changes. And yet, little by little you can make those gorgeous and important design changes that make your community feel better when they spend time with you in your office. These changes become visible the more consistently you do them. Remember, it's drips adding up! So please, keep making those decor changes to your waiting rooms, offices, clinics, and other wellness rooms. They make a huge difference to everyone's health and wellbeing.

To get you started, here are three simple design changes that can make your medical practice feel more inviting:

1. **Lighting:** Got a lighting problem with those awful overhead fluorescent lights? No problem. Turn them off and buy some affordable floor and table lamps and place them throughout the room. Your patients and clients will LOVE this new cozy vibe in your office. Many studies over the past 25 years report on the harmful effects of cool fluorescent lighting.²⁻⁴ For free lighting inspiration, visit '[Lighting for Medical and Healthcare Spaces](#)'.⁵ If possible, install a dimmer for those bright overhead lights. It's more affordable than you think.
2. **Paint:** Paint the walls in your waiting room or treatment room a beautiful soothing blue. It takes one weekend (or even one day, if your office is small) and maybe a few of your staff, community members, and friends can help you paint. This is also a wonderful way to build relationships with staff. Some of my clients have made painting into a "Paint Party" by inviting their patients to help. By Monday, your waiting

room has literally transformed. Then enjoy the compliments and greater relaxation among your patients. Blue is a deeply calming and soothing color. During these intense times in the world, a blue walled waiting room (or exam room) can do more good than you can imagine to relaxing your patient or client's nervous system. For more help on selecting the best color blue and more than two dozen best paint colors for your healthcare space, read *The Color Cure 2.0—How to transform your healthcare office, clinic or treatment room into an oasis by choosing the perfect paint.*⁶

3. **Simple furniture swap:** Finally, this tip is one of my favorites because of how simple it is and how much bang for your buck you get out of this one design change. Swap out your square and rectangular side tables and coffee tables in your waiting room for round or curved ones. Studies have shown that people feel safer and more relaxed in rooms that have curved shapes. The human brain prefers curves over rectilinear shapes (especially those sharp edges) because it perceives the signal: lack of threat.⁷ Vartanian and his colleagues⁷ found:

*Participants were more likely to judge spaces as beautiful if they were curvilinear than rectilinear. Neuroanatomically, when contemplating beauty, curvilinear contour activated the anterior cingulate cortex exclusively, a region strongly responsive to the reward properties and emotional salience of objects. Complementing this finding, pleasantness—the valence dimension of the affect circumplex—accounted for nearly 60 per cent of the variance in beauty ratings. Furthermore, the combination of our behavioral and neural evidence underscores the role of emotion in our preference for curvilinear objects in this domain.*⁷

LESSONS LEARNED

Over the past 15 years in my design work, I have had clients consistently report back to me how, by taking my design advice and swapping out even one piece of rectilinear furniture in their healthcare offices, patients would notice a positive difference in how the space felt, enough to mention it to staff. Apply this curvilinear approach to your office design in everything, including:

- Floor patterns
- Artwork
- Waiting room furniture
- Desks and the reception desk
- Lighting

With these simple design tips, or drips as Seth Godin likes to call them, you can progressively make changes to your medical office over time that make your patients and staff want to return to a place that is pleasing to the eye and easy on the nervous system. This is good for you, your business, and the world.

DESIGN INSIGHT

This article demonstrates three clear examples of how to improve PLACE, one of the key components of the patient experience. In *Improving the Patient Experience through the Healthcare Physical Environment*,¹ the American Hospital Association introduces its people, process, and place theory to improve the patient experience. Improving lighting, adding a fresh coat of paint, and removing harsh corners on furniture in the waiting room of healthcare organizations can impact the patient experience.

In *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market* Gerald Zaltman from Harvard University writes: “Ninety-five percent of thought, emotion, and learning occur in the unconscious mind—that is, without our awareness. Emotions play a bigger role than logic in people's decisions.”² With this understanding, impressions about a facility weigh into the thoughts of a patient as they think about their overall experience and rank their patient satisfaction.

For organizations that want to increase patient satisfaction scores, a best practice from industry is to design the experience beyond the interaction with the clinician. This article gives three tactics that are substantiated from other studies to improve overall experience.

President
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