

Artwork at hospitals can help in the healing process

August 21 2009, By Lindsay Kalter

For most people, a word-association game starting with "hospital" would yield few positive adjectives. Bland. Drab. Depressing. Institutional. And studies have found that these aesthetic unpleasantries can affect patients' health.

A growing body of research shows that decorating hospitals with specific types of artwork can speed up a patient's healing process, while gloomy walls or the wrong kind of [art](#) can cause physical distress.

"It's the whole emotional and perceptual context you are in," says Upali Nanda, vice president and director of research for American Art Resources, a health-care art-consulting firm in Houston. "When you're in a [hospital](#), it's high [stress](#). When we are high stress, we go back to our primal need to be soothed."

Nanda, who has a doctorate in architecture with a specialization in health-care systems and design, says scientific studies show that art can aid in the recovery of [patients](#), shorten hospital stays and help manage pain. But she says it has to be the right art -- vivid paintings of landscapes, friendly faces and familiar objects can lower blood pressure and heart rate, while abstract pictures can have the opposite effect.

Nanda and two university professors did a study at Houston's St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital using two types of art. In the first group were images that had been proven to calm patients, including green landscapes, water scenes, cultural artifacts and emotionally expressive pictures of people.

The second group contained abstract pieces by artists such as Vincent van Gogh. When asked which they preferred, most patients chose images from the first group.

Nanda says one theory is that abstract art allows patients to project their own anxieties onto the image. Thus, pictures that clearly portray pleasant images are more soothing.

"If you are under stress and [anxiety](#), if you see an image that is ambiguous, you interpret it negatively."

Nanda says environmental psychologists began studying health care in the 1960s. In 1984, scientists found that postoperative patients healed more quickly and successfully if they had park-view windows. Through the 1980s, scientists became more interested in the role of art in hospitals. The concept of therapeutic design has become more popular in the last decade, she says.

Healthcare Art Consulting, a firm in Dallas that advises medical companies on how to use art in their buildings, refers to these scientific findings while working with their clients.

"Clinical and academic research in the past 10 years has been really putting a strong influence on the healing effects of health-care facilities," says Jerry Joyner, who is chief executive officer of the company, which his wife, Sara Beth Joyner, founded last year.

In April, their company helped refurbish the joint unit of Baylor Medical Center at Irving, Texas. The hallways, which were previously dull and outdated, are now lined with paintings of trees, flowers and fields. Patients trying to regain mobility after hip and knee surgeries are met with motivational pictures every 25 feet to keep them energized. These distance markers, adorned with inspirational quotes and pictures

of plants, replaced plain pieces of tape that were used before the art was installed.

"Before it just looked like an old hospital," says Baylor's chief nursing officer, Brenda Blain. "Now it's calming, and it's not a regular hospital environment."

CONSIDERING PATIENTS

Physicians in the joint unit had wanted to use pictures of athletes in action -- figure skaters, boxers and runners. But Joyner took the average age of patients into consideration.

"If you think about the people getting hip replacements, they're going to be in the older age range," says Joyner, who advised corporate clients on art purchases before focusing on health-care businesses. "They're going to want to see art that they can better relate to."

She says they were careful to stay away from art that depicted a certain age or gender as active. She instead offered suggestions that would apply to a more diverse group, including a picture of a golf course that reads, "Determination: Without challenge there is no achievement."

"We get athletes, but we get grandma and grandpa, too," says Grant Farrimond, Baylor's director of marketing and public relations. "We don't want to be an art museum, but we do want the art to inspire and soothe."

SPECIFIC NEEDS

Art can also be used to help patients on a more practical level. Autumn Leaves in Flower Mound, Texas, an Alzheimer's and dementia facility that was a client of Healthcare Art Consulting, uses artwork to keep

patients oriented to their surroundings.

Each of the four hallways has a different theme, which helps patients remember where their rooms are. Among them is a landscape hallway covered in outdoor settings and a Western hallway depicting images from the Old West.

"We wanted to make sure the images were not violent" in the Western wing, Ms. Joyner says. "So there are a lot of hill and country scenes. Back in the patients' days there was more farmland, so the pictures can help remind them of their childhood."

Jennifer Plunkett, director of design at Autumn Leaves, stressed the importance of tactile art in Alzheimer's and dementia clinics. Among the art in Autumn Leaves is a picture of a horse made of furlike material.

"It's important for Alzheimer's and dementia patients to have their senses stimulated," she says.

"It's soothing, and it helps them remember what things feel like."

Nanda said although there is a wealth of scientific knowledge about art and health care, there is much more to learn.

American Art Resources is studying the role of art in pediatric units, and how artwork affects the perception of patient wait time in urgent care.

"Ultimately, it is a design field. There is no compromise on creativity and originality," Nanda said.

"But you want it to be strongly based in research and evidence, because the stakes are so high."

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