

Designing for the Professional Caregiver - A Fresh Focus To Design Research

We invited Amy Griffin, the 2013 winner of the [AAHID/Steelcase Health Student Fellowship Award](#), to write about her research. Congrats Amy on the award!

Healthcare facilities today are much more than places to get better in – they also need to be places to feel well in. Optimal healing environments that promote wellbeing is becoming a key driver for designers. This is partially accomplished by researching how the environment can enhance the patient experience. One key stakeholder that is sometimes overlooked, however, is the professional caregiver. Given their influential role in creating an environment conducive to healing, how can we also create an optimal work environment for them? How can the designed environment best suit *their* needs?

I set out to answer this question when I came to the research study portion of my thesis, *Optimal Healing + Working Environments: Designing Supportive Spaces for Professional Caregivers*, and I was able to look even deeper through my fellowship funded by the Steelcase Health/AAHID graduate research fellowship. The fellowship was established to invite fresh and alternative thinking from those studying interior design in healthcare settings, with the ultimate goal of providing improved patient outcomes through design, and my topic of interest was the perfect fit.

It was not easy finding scholarly sources about professional caregivers and the designed environment, but I was eventually able to find several eye-opening studies that reported the effects of the healthcare environment on professional caregiver productivity and satisfaction. A number of the studies found that the physical environment can influence the quality of patient care as well. This research led me to my ultimate conclusion: if an environment is designed to support professional caregivers' well-being, promote their productivity, and boost their satisfaction, those benefits will then trickle down to their patients as well.

DESIGNING SUPPORTIVE SPACES FOR PROFESSIONAL CAREGIVERS

The foundation for my research study was the [Optimal Healing Environment \(OHE\) Model](#). The term was coined by the Samueli Institute in 2002 to define an environment where every aspect of healthcare (relational, physical, spiritual, medicinal, etc.) come together to heal a person. The model consists of several domains which provide guidelines for healthcare facilities. As an interior design student, I focused my research on the OHE's *Building Healing Spaces* domain. This domain has several components: architecture, lighting, color, artwork, nature, water, music, and aroma. My research focused on the first five components and how these impact professional caregivers' well-being, satisfaction, and productivity in a cancer center setting.

The research process began with 16 hours of observation in which I sat in key areas of the cancer center (the CT area, several nurses stations, the medical oncology clinic, the radiation oncology clinic, the chemotherapy infusion suite, and a staff break-room) and noted professional caregiver behavior and how their work environment affected their routine. I then conducted individual interviews with the cancer center administrator, four nurses, and one counselor. The observations and interviews revealed several key design considerations:

- Professional caregivers should be located close in proximity to their colleagues for easy communication, but have adequate space to do their own work.
- Professional caregiver work stations and patient care areas should provide adequate storage for supplies and supply stock should be close at hand.
- Professional caregiver work stations should be located in close proximity to patient care areas as to avoid constantly walking long distances.
- Professional caregivers appreciate color in their work spaces and natural artwork.
- Professional caregivers desire control over lighting
- Professional caregivers desire a place of respite with privacy from patients – to relax for breaks (which usually just consists of their 30 minute lunch, if they’re lucky).

In a nut shell, this study highlights the powerful opportunity designers have to create environments that enhance the well-being of patients, visitors, and professional caregivers. Some design teams are stepping ahead of the curve and inviting nurses and other professional caregivers to be a part of the design process. It is the professional caregivers’ expertise that helps assure the environment is comfortable for patients, accommodating for visitors, and efficient for professional caregivers. By meeting the needs of all users, designers can truly create a healing environment.

A special thank you to Steelcase Health and to AAHID for supporting this research and for allowing me the opportunity to share the findings.

For further information on how to apply for the fellowship, please visit the [AAHID website](#). Amy Griffin’s findings will be presented on Monday November 18 at 3:05pm at [Healthcare Design Conference 2013](#). Steelcase Health will also be exhibiting at the Conference in booth # 1201.

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