

## Exam Rooms that Empower People

**Spaces can help healthcare organizations manage costs and drive revenue, while improving patient outcomes and increasing their satisfaction.**

The quality of people's experiences and the human dimensions of healthcare are more important than ever before. As active participants versus passive patients, today's consumers of care are transforming past norms, driving rapid change across the industry as they seek a person-to-person approach and more control over decisions about their health and wellbeing.

Many are actively "shopping" for the best care by checking hospital and doctor ratings, asking more questions during appointments, expecting more information, and researching cost and treatment options. Others are being prompted by their doctors to take on more accountability for their health through meaningful lifestyle changes that address often-preventable diseases such as obesity, diabetes and hypertension.

As new tools, programs and approaches rapidly evolve, healthcare organizations are grappling with how to incorporate them successfully. At the same time, they shouldn't overlook an asset that's highly leverageable and pivotal to success: their spaces.

"When thoughtfully designed and equipped around the needs of patients as well as staff, spaces can help healthcare organizations manage costs and drive revenue, while improving patient outcomes and increasing their satisfaction," says Bob Crain, Steelcase vice president of strategic markets, which includes the Steelcase Health group.

### **OVERDUE FOR CHANGE**

As patient engagement becomes the new clinical paradigm, medical exam rooms are critically overdue for a makeover. Yesterday's exam rooms may have sufficed when receiving care was mostly a passive experience, but reimagining them to support today's user needs can reap tremendous benefits.

"For most people, the exam room is at the center of the healthcare experience," says Crain. "It's where the clinical and personal aspects of healthcare closely intersect."

Unfortunately, however, traditional exam rooms are woefully inadequate to support the stepped-up teaching and learning that are essential for people's engagement in their health. This is among the significant findings of Steelcase Health researchers who have conducted more than 15,000 hours of observations and inquiry through 18 studies to understand the how healthcare spaces are actually used and to identify ways they can be improved.

The Steelcase Health researchers observed that most exam rooms are intimidating environments that don't encourage patients to interact with information. Exam tables put patients at a different height than the healthcare provider, making sharing information awkward and impersonal. If a computer is in the room, sightlines to the information on it are typically limited to healthcare providers. What's more, fixed, bulky furniture makes most exam rooms crowded. They aren't designed to accommodate family or other support persons who are often important partners in attaining optimal health and wellbeing. There's no private place to undress, inadequate storage for belongings, and little to do but wait or read a random magazine before the healthcare provider enters the room.

## **ANTICIPATING PEOPLE'S NEEDS**

"We are finding that exam rooms today are about much more than exams. They need to be equipped for teaching and learning about health status, conditions, treatments and healthy lifestyles," says Hyun Yoo, a Steelcase Health senior designer. "This means leveraging multiple ways of connecting people to information. It also means designing exam rooms so they accommodate more people than just the healthcare provider and patient. Having family or loved ones in the exam room, physically or virtually, helps to ensure that important information is heard, understood and retained. This increases the chances for engagement and good outcomes."

Creating a palette of place—within the exam room or in an adjoining room—to support the different activities that occur during exam and consultation assures that meaningful conversations can take place and new and emerging technologies can be used to heighten understanding.

For healthcare providers, it's important that exam rooms are efficient, well-equipped spaces that streamline work processes. Easy mobility can be a time-saver. And with smart devices, apps and Web-based information among the new tools healthcare providers use for exams, it's important that technology devices stay in reach and in sight for everyone in the exam room.

"When the elements of place, technology and people are holistically considered in exam rooms, the result can be more engaging, connected care," says Yoo.

As part of a strategic framework, exam rooms are essential tools for supporting the transition to consumer engagement in healthcare. When thoughtfully designed around user needs and furnished with innovative products, exam rooms can be efficient and flexible work environments for healthcare providers. They can also be high-functioning, supportive spaces where patients can focus on the important topic of their health and wellbeing.

## **CREATED FOR BETTER EXAM EXPERIENCES**

Research-based insights into people's wants and needs in exam rooms inspired development of the Steelcase Health [Empath](#) recliner, an alternative to exam tables that puts everyone on the same level and makes it easier to transition from one procedure to the next.

Whether it's an exam room in a doctor's office, an urgent care center, a surgery center or the emergency room, Empath is an empowering alternative to an exam table.

Empath is also well suited to quick care spaces for primary care patients who have simple, straightforward care needs that don't require a fully outfitted exam room setting.

Whatever the setting, Empath makes it easy for people to connect to each other and to information, helping to humanize the healthcare experience. The following exam room settings have been informed by insights from our research to create exam rooms that empower people and allow for better patient engagement and improving patient outcomes.

**Multi-Purpose Exam Room:** This space encourage patients, families and clinicians to exercise the new roles and relationships of connected healthcare experiences. Exams, consulting and administrative tasks—like scheduling a follow-up session—can all be done right here.

**Consultative Care Room:** High-performance spaces that emphasize information-sharing and collaborative decision-making. Not every appointment requires a medical exam. Sometimes scheduled time is spent reviewing x-rays, test results, medical data and treatment options.

**Quick Care Space:** These compact, semi-private exam spaces are a convenient, cost-saving option for primary-care patients who have simple, straightforward needs. Minimal clinical equipment is needed to perform the basic exams that take place here, and patients value the simplicity, ease and comfort.

**The Care Suite:** Especially for patients with health issues, having a two-room care suite to handle the medical exam and a consultation optimizes the appointment, offering support for examination and consultation, teaching and learning, with each activity taking place in a space that's best equipped to support it.

## **REIMAGINED EXAMS: SMARTPHONE PHYSICALS**

To show how space and technology can work together to improve healthcare experiences, Steelcase Health partnered with Medgadget clinicians to provide Smartphone Physicals at three events: TEDMED 2013 in Washington, D.C., NeoCon 2013 in Chicago, and at the AARP Member Event in Atlanta.

### **The Technology**

Smartphone Physicals marry a smartphone, apps and accessories to perform non-intrusive physicals that include metrics for weight, blood pressure, oxygen saturation, lung function and other health indicators. In addition to showing how technology can make an exam more accurate, Smartphone Physicals engage patients so they are able to see what the clinician is seeing, says Johns Hopkins medical student and Medgadget editor Shiv Gaglani, a member of the clinical team.

### **The Exam Space**

The Smartphone Physicals demonstrated how Steelcase Health's research-based applications and products enhanced the clinical team's ability to perform the physicals and improved the experiences of people receiving the exams.

The environments featured Empath recliners instead of exam tables, Pocket mobile worksurfaces and Verge mobile stools for clinicians, and Regard seating with integrated power outlets for people who were waiting. The Smartphone Physical experience wouldn't have been as positive without these innovative products, reports Gaglani.

“This space resolved what can be an awkward process of collecting and inputting patient information into a seamless, engaging process, bringing patient, doctor and technology together.”

### **The Experience**

Overall, the Smartphone Physical environments demonstrated the value of supporting person-to-person consulting as an integral part of the exam process, reinforcing a key insight from Steelcase Health research: When healthcare providers and patients view information together, they communicate better and learn more.

As one Smartphone Physical participant, Roz Cama of Cama Design, put it: “You almost don't feel like a patient. You're just having an intelligent conversation with a colleague about something very important—your health.

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