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# Listen Up: Surveying Patients To Shape Better Designs

February 19, 2016 by Catherine Gow



Sometimes the best ideas are the most obvious. For example, if you want to make cancer patients comfortable during treatments, ask them how.

When designing cancer facilities, architects must keep the physical, psychological, and emotional needs

of patients at the forefront of their process. To help guide this, Francis Cauffman's design team surveys cancer survivors about their experience with treatment and the environment in which they receive care.

However, as with any building project, there is no single solution for all patients. In fact, there are as many preferences as there are individuals and types of treatment. But the cancer patients we surveyed agreed on one thing: They wanted to be able to control their own physical environments. Here are some ideas on how that might be translated to design.

### Sensory comfort

During chemotherapy, which typically consists of spending three to six hours attached to an IV, many people, especially women, get cold. Patients who have undergone this treatment have requested radiant heat and warm blankets for added comfort. Some patients also experience increased sensitivity to light during chemotherapy. Adjustable, remote-controlled window shades are a solution that helps to reduce glare and ease the patient experience.

One surprising revelation that came from survivors concerned food. While it may seem counterintuitive that patients would want to eat while receiving chemo, many who don't experience stomach upset actually do. They're there for long hours, and once they have acclimated to the medications, many would enjoy a snack, inspiring the inclusion of a café and furniture within treatment spaces where patients might sit to have a meal.

During radiation treatment, patients who are typically lying down for about 20 minutes said they would welcome a soothing, spa-like environment, including images on the ceiling and pleasant smells. Positive distraction helps patients keep their minds off



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uncomfortable side effects. Design solutions might also include the use of natural stone, soothing artwork, and warm colors.

Access to nature was also requested, which might be delivered with plant motifs or sculptures used within the building as well as walking paths and courtyards with lush plantings outside.

#### Space planning and furnishings

Some patients undergoing infusions, including chemotherapy and IV therapies, like to socialize during treatment to develop a sense of community. Patients also request larger treatment spaces with comfortable seating for their families. Others, particularly those experiencing a negative reaction to the treatment, prefer to be alone. Choice is key, so designers should incorporate both private and group spaces. One solution is to use an open space but install dividers that can be closed, to allow flexibility based on patient preference.

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