



Photo courtesy of Wellness, LLC

A room of the future by Wellness, LLC, at United Medical Center in Cheyenne, Wyo.

## Room With a View of the Future

BY KARA McDONALD

When one hears the phrase "patient room of the future," the image he or she conjures might be similar to something out of a *Terminator* movie: cold, hard steel everywhere, robotic nurses, and talking appliances. However, according to several healthcare design firms across the United States, the patient rooms of the future will not only be comfortable and accommodating, but they will also be equipped with enough capability and flexibility to ensure that the rooms will remain up-to-date well into the future.

"Our vision is to revolutionize the creation of man-made healthcare environments to advance the art of healing in today's world," says Bart Franey, president and CEO of Wellness, LLC, a company that specializes in designing patient rooms of the future. "Over one-half of U.S. hospitals'

patient rooms have exceeded their useful lives, and 20,000 to 25,000 patient rooms are replaced or renovated yearly."

These annual renovations are due to a number of factors, Franey continues. "The rooms of the present are small, don't support family involvement in caregiving and support, don't have safe bathrooms that comply with disability access codes, don't adapt well to new communications technologies, and are expensive and time-consuming to maintain," he says.

Another reason rooms of the future are needed is because the patient population is changing, says John Waugh, AIA, health sciences principal at Ellerbe Becket. He says that hospital patients during the next 30 to 40 years will come from the baby boomer generation—a group that has come to expect more from consumer offer-

ings over the years. "As individuals grow older, they'll have a greater need for health-care and will frequently have multiple problems. They may also be having elective procedures and a general expectation of a higher level of care, including spalike amenities," says Waugh.

While some amenities, such as window treatments and wallpaper, are more obvious upgrades, there are other, more subtle ways that rooms of the future can be designed to be more conducive to patient care. "Our design for the room of the future, called the Wellness Room, is a 'product' that is custom designed for the type of patient being treated, and it is more durable and needs less maintenance than rooms of the present," says Franey. "A major difference is the use of curved corners, edges, and surfaces for walls, bathrooms, and furniture. These features are much safer and maintenance-free. They also address the psychology of the environment through the use of curved surfaces, color, native artwork, and sound for privacy and healing."

Waugh says that Ellerbe Becket's room of the future will have similar design features, including the following:

- sinks and work counters in locations where they aid efficiency and save time;
- space for families to "camp out" to aid in patient care and help stem the nursing shortage; and
- flexibility to serve one purpose today and a totally different purpose in 30 years.

Designing the patient room of the future is not all fun and games, however. With Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) privacy regulations in place, careful considerations must be kept in mind. "The design of the patient room of the future will need to appropriately safeguard the privacy and dignity of the patient," says Cynthia Marcotte Stamer, partner with Epstein Becker Green Wickliff & Hall, PC's National Health Law Practice in Dallas. "Thoughtful room design should promote confidentiality. For instance, the layout of patient space should enable medical personnel involved in treatment and the family to appropriately access and observe the patient and his or her information while

...minimizing the ability of others to view the patient and information."

Not to worry—these HIPAA regulations play a major part of the design process, says Franey. "We provide separate in-room workstations for electronic charting and information retrieval for staff, a wall system that reduces sound and transient conversation through the walls and ceiling, and designs that shield patients from corridor noise and traffic," he says.

At Ellerbe Becket, HIPAA is also taken



*A view from the corridor of the patient room of the future: Medical personnel get a clear view into the room from the corridor, and there is room for family and friends as caregivers.*

into consideration. "The staff work area can either be in an alcove off the corridor or in the room near the corridor. There is an issue relative to HIPAA and confidentiality, especially with the nurse alcove located off the public corridor," says Waugh. "The computers with the patient information are exposed, and there are a couple of ways to respond to this. In today's situations, the information can be password-protected. We can also recess the screens into the countertop so you can't read the information over someone's

shoulder. In other words, it's a software and casework detail issue. In the long term, computers will be smaller and portable. They won't be left at the desk but will be taken with the healthcare provider, and the desk will be simply a place to sit and work."

Hospitals that wish to upgrade their rooms of the present to rooms of the future can do so

no matter how old or outdated the structure, says Franey. "Any healthcare facility can use our system for either renovation or new construction—it is simply a matter of asking us whether or not it's a good fit," he explains. "Our product is 'demountable' so it can be completely disassembled and reinstalled elsewhere. We can also easily remove wall panels to accommodate changes in technology or effect other changes and repairs more quickly than ripping apart dry wall."

As for cost, Franey says it all depends on the rooms that need updating. "Pricing is based on the room specifications, including size, application, equipment, location, and installation date," he explains. "When compared with conventional construction, we have a cheaper installed cost and a lower life cycle cost."

Waugh agrees that cost varies by situation, but says that it "shouldn't be a large factor. Over the long term, it probably will result in savings because it will be more adaptable to new technologies and changes in use."

— Kara McDonald is an editorial assistant at *For the Record*.