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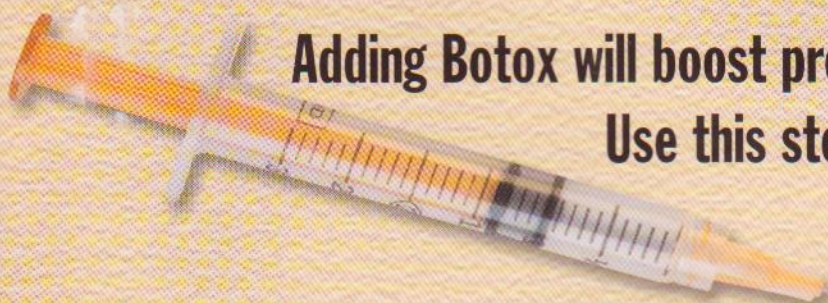
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Improve Your Office Design With These Common Sense Tips

These simple ideas from design experts and practicing dermatologists can make your practice run more smoothly by improving efficiency and decreasing staff burn-out.

By Judith Lee
Contributing Editor

With nearly constant pressure to add services and grow their practice, dermatologists often find themselves working in space that no longer meets their needs or the needs of the staff or patients. All medical practices are under pressure to become more time-efficient, making office layout more important than ever.

"I'm a true believer that process and patient flow have a major impact on efficiency. If offices are designed so that the work-up is a constant flow throughout the design, the amount of time and efficiency that can be captured is tremendous," says Polly Duca, a consultant with Healthcare Management Associates, Plymouth Meeting, Pa.

Yet experts say that many offices are behind the times, with physicians and staff stumbling over layouts that slow them down. They advise dermatologists to invest some time, creativity, and if needed, money into resolving design problems. Here are some solutions to challenges you may be facing right now.

SUBDIVIDE AND CONQUER

Experts say you need enough rooms so patients don't get bottlenecked in one area. In older offices, this bottleneck area is typically right out in the waiting room.

"The worst mistake you can make is to have one waiting area. This will become too congested as the practice grows. You need sub-waiting areas for patients, possibly equipped with educational videos or a nourishment station," says medical design consultant John Marasco of Telluride, Co.

That's exactly what Debra Price, MD is building into her Miami dermatology office, as it expands from 3,500 sq. ft. to 5,000 sq. ft.

"All the patients will come into a single reception area, and then will be directed to one of the two waiting areas. Medical patients will be in one area, and aesthetics patients will have their own waiting room. In this way, we won't have cosmetic patients squeezed in next to patients



A spacious waiting room allows patients to feel comfortable while they wait to see you.

with bandages or other visible problems; that can make the cosmetic patients uncomfortable,” says Dr. Price.

It’s also important to have enough exam rooms so you can move efficiently through your schedule.

“The number of exam rooms has limited our efficiency. We’ve found you need several rooms per physician. This decreases the waiting time for patients, and just as importantly, for the whole staff,” says Dr. Price.

Since many dermatology patients are elderly, their mobility is an important concern for your office. Moving them from place to place may inconvenience them, and place a burden on the staff.

“You have to weigh efficiency against patient satisfaction. How often can you move an elderly patient who has poor mobility? Maybe it’s better to add exam rooms so the patient can move to one spot and wait for you,” says Mr. Marasco.

THE COMFORTS OF HOME

If you’re unable to have entirely separate waiting areas, you can move furniture to create sub-areas. You also can be sure to offer nourishment and other comforts to ease the wait.

“Our reception area is large, open and friendly, with a special kids’ area and televisions. It’s very esthetically pleasing; it doesn’t ‘look like’ an office,” Michael Gold, MD says about his 17,000 sq. ft. dermatology practice in Nashville.

“Sometimes practices get busy, and patients just

have to wait—you can’t avoid it,” notes Dr. Price. “We try to make it more comfortable with crackers and other light snacks and beverages. There are phones for patients to use that don’t interfere with our office lines.”

GO MODULAR

If your office is very large, physicians and techs may be fatigued by too much walking, and the lack of visual access to one another hampers communication.

“I see technicians wasting from one to two hours a day walking from room to room and patient to patient,” says Ms. Duca. “Doctors moving among six or seven rooms instead of two or three is also a huge waste.”

If you’re in a group practice with long hallways, consultants urge you to think in terms of smaller spaces or “pods.”

“Create a modular layout with pods. Each pod can be fairly self-contained, with a six-doctor practice becoming three two-doctor practices,” says Mr. Marasco.

Shared reception and equipment can be located centrally. The whole idea is to cut down on steps.

“Even the best cook will become more efficient if the kitchen has a stove, sink and refrigerator close together. Think about each step in the patient care process—who does it, and what tools does that person need? Now who will handle the next step, and how?” explains San Diego medical consultant John Pinto.



Courtesy of Patricia Farris, MD

Some offices have two waiting rooms: one for patients with clinical presentations, and one for cosmetic patients.

DUPLICATE

If you have enough rooms to work with, think about ways to make them more efficient. Dr. Gold makes his exam and procedure rooms identical, so he never has to look for supplies or equipment.

"We have many procedure rooms, and each room is configured the same. When I walk in, I never have to wonder where things will be. Every surgical room has liquid nitrogen, identical surgical equipment, and the same supplies. Someone is in charge of checking supplies and replenishing them when they get low," he explains.

CONSOLIDATE

If your practice has grown, but you aren't ready to expand or move to a larger space, try to cast a creative eye on your current layout.

"If you have to work in the space you have, try to reallocate space. Move more exam or procedure rooms up front, where they are more convenient for patients. The room in the back is great for transcriptionists, the billing office, or the doctor's private office," Mr. Marasco says.

You can gain space by rethinking optional rooms, such as doctor's offices. If these are located in your main patient area, it might be time to move instruments in there, converting them into exam or pre-test rooms. Since dermatologists rarely meet with patients in their private office, your "new" office could be a cubicle near the business office, or a space shared with a partner or associate.

"The nature of the way I practice is that I see patients in the exam room, not in a private office. And we have

a small consultation room we can use to meet with patients. Dermatologists really just need a work station to call their own," says Dr. Price.

MOVE STAFF TO PATIENTS

If possible, put a nursing station right in the middle of the "action," or consider other ways to keep nurses in touch with patients.

"Your staff is your biggest investment; don't hide them away," says Mr. Pinto. "We like to create stand-up writing desks, and give the staff portable phones. This keeps them on the floor."

You might want to place your nursing station up front, near reception and medical records. Dr. Price has a central intake area which also serves as the nursing station. The other rooms radiate off this, saving steps for staff and patients.

The New Orleans practice of Patti Farris, MD has a nursing station strategically located between reception and the business office. She likes this because staff are more in touch with patients, and she's more in touch with staff.

"The nursing station is just beyond the business office so we can all greet patients when they enter the office. It gives a friendly feeling, I think. We also can communicate freely with the front office. I like being able to hear how the phone calls are handled, and can often troubleshoot patient problems for the receptionists while I am making notes at the nursing station," she says.

CIRCLE BACK

When staff and patients need to move down a long cor-

ridor and back again, they waste steps as well as create congestion. Experts suggest that a circular or U-shaped layout is worth a great deal in improved efficiency.

"We prefer a 'racetrack' design. The patient process can move either way around the 'track,' and end up at the same place—reception/check-out—without anyone doubling back. The staff saves steps by crossing through, rather than walking all the way around," says Will Rogers, a Denver architect who has designed many health care offices.

In the pods described above by Mr. Marasco, the tech station can be placed in the middle, with exam rooms in a V around the station. This gives staff and doctors visual access to one another and to all the rooms.

"We try to keep everyone in the game," Mr. Marasco says. "The huddle is at the nursing station, and the nurses are the quarterbacks. The doctor is more of a running back."

Dr. Price's office design is based on a central intake area, which serves as the nursing station. The medical rooms radiate off these.

"The flow is efficient, with no long hallways to wear us out. It's easy to get from one room to another, and we aren't bumping into each other," she says.

Dr. Farris believes that a smaller office can provide the most efficient layout, because everything is close.

"I was in a four-doctor practice, and now I'm in a 1,500 sq. ft., solo office. I think the smaller office is more efficient. In my former office, it seemed like we were always walking from one end of the office to another to get samples and products. In the smaller space, I'm no more than a few steps from anything I need. Less space is better if it's designed for efficiency," Dr. Farris says.

FOCUS ON BUSINESS

As managed care has increased the workload for billing staff, many practices have added people. The growing staff gets crammed into a tiny office that was designed for just one person.

Consultants suggest that you try to give billing staff privacy in order to allow them to concentrate better. Along with finding more space for them (another opportunity to reallocate space—perhaps your private office?), divide the room with cubicle half-walls, which will give the added benefit of some sound absorption.

"We've seen as much as a 50 percent increase in efficiency for the billing staff when we eliminate the 'bullpen' seating. This is detailed work, and the staff shouldn't be interrupted. With cubicle half-walls, they still can ask one another questions, yet they have their own space," says John Pinto, a San Diego medical consultant.



A centralized nursing station cuts down on staff traffic.

If you have the room, you may want to design a private area for all functions not directly related to patient care, says Dr. Gold.

"We created a separate area for billing, physicians' offices and administration offices. There's a conference room that seats 40 or 50 people. With a big practice, you spend a lot of time just running the practice, and this gives me the privacy I need," Dr. Gold explains.

Another approach is to place billing right up front, where the patients and other staff need them. Ms. Duca says this may not be the best environment for the billing staff, but it supports the practice better: "When you have the financial office up front, the staff can head off financial issues. They will overhear something that's wrong, and the front desk can ask them questions."

EXPAND

For placing the billing office and every other component of the practice, consultants say a careful timeflow analysis is critical. Where does the patient go at each step of the process? Which staff person is needed at each step? What would be the most efficient way, without compromising patient satisfaction?

"We look for ways to make patients happy and keep the practice running smoothly. If you can find a way to achieve this in the space you're in, then almost any amount of change is worth it," says Mr. Pinto. "If you can't achieve this in the space you're in, it's time to move."

Dermatologists say they've learned this the hard way. In a dozen years in practice, Dr. Gold has moved three times. He began with a tiny, 1,000 sq. ft. space, moving up to 3,000 sq. ft. to 6,000 sq. ft., to 17,000 sq. ft. today.

"The big mistake is not planning for growth," he says. "If you're any good, you will achieve your five-year plan in two years. Then you'll need to expand. For some reason, most of us underestimate how much space we'll need, and how soon we'll need it." ■