

CULTURALLY SENSITIVE HEALTHCARE DESIGN



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Natassja Wynhorst explores why designing in a culturally sensitive manner is often a factor over-looked by many who's main focus is to create and deliver a concept which simply 'looks good.' And by doing so, this lack of researched approach may end up being culturally upsetting and offensive.

As the world becomes increasingly 'smaller,' many communities in the modern day are becoming exponentially more multicultural and diverse. Contemporary Australia is a great example in which we are all familiar with when discussing cultural diversity. Australia is essentially populated through the diversity of the land's Indigenous population, the colonisation by the British, and the extensive immigration from several diverse cultures.

Each of these unique cultures bring unique values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours in which should be respected and catered for throughout the nation's commerce and healthcare sectors.

To design in a culturally sensitive manner is often a factor over-looked by many who's main focus is to create and deliver a concept which simply 'looks good.' Yet, with this tunnel-vision approach and lack of research into the surrounding communities and cultural backgrounds, the delivered design concept may inevitably be culturally upsetting and offensive.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

General Practitioners (GPs) are often considered the first point of contact for the general Australian population when receiving healthcare. Due to this fact, Australia's GPs see a vast variety of numerous culturally diverse patients, whom differ in beliefs, values and lifestyles, resulting in the need for GPs to understand these aspects and to help, prescribe, and diagnose accordingly and appropriately.

This cultural understanding from GPs and their responsiveness to differing customs play major parts in improving the medical access that the general population has and can result in "closing the gap in healthcare outcomes." The GPs whom are equipped with greater knowledge and awareness of their clients ensure

cultural safety, dignity, privacy and a better client experience through to use of appropriate care.

Our GPs whom practise cultural sensitivity attract and retain clients due to their empathy and understanding of a variety of lifestyles, languages, and physical contact appropriateness. Yet, although cultural sensitivity is implemented into their daily practises, it is often forgotten in the implementation of the physical and visual surroundings.

Similar to how certain behaviours, actions and jargon may be deemed as upsetting or offensive, the interior design of the healthcare environment may also be considered as 'offensive'. This may have a direct negative impact upon a certain cultural demographic. This can result in a negative client experience, bad reviews, a decrease in attraction and retention, and the potential action of negative media coverage and legal implications.

LAYOUT CONSIDERATIONS

Although many request hospitals and healthcare environments to be designed based upon Western standards, the planning of the space's layout may need to be adjusted to support the needs of specific populations.

A great example of this specific layout design approach is taking into consideration the largely family-orientated cultures. Many healthcare spaces in a community populated by Middle-Eastern cultures experience a greater volume of family visits, as the culture is extremely family-orientated and close-knit.

The layout design must take this into consideration and expect patients to be accompanied by more than one family member, since medical decisions are often a family matter. The implementation of larger waiting areas, and seating

cluster arrangements cater for such situations as they provide comfort for all family members visiting.

Not only this, but the layout design of your space must also take into consideration the duration of visits from all clients. For example, a hospital may see clients staying in the facility for weeks, in which they should be catered for accordingly.

For clients with long-term stays, the layout of the building may need to incorporate separate prayer rooms. Implementing this into the construction of the medical space will allow patients to feel welcomed and at home.

COLOUR PALETTE CONSIDERATIONS

Colours help the space users to experience and connect with the surroundings and can also evoke certain emotions and atmospheres throughout the space; and healthcare environments are no different. However, certain colours may have specific associations attached to them in different cultures. Therefore, it is best to research the local cultural demographic of the client basis and then to design the colour palette appropriately.

The colour red is a great example of this. In Western cultures, the colour red is often associated with love and intimacy, where as in Eastern cultures it is associated to vitality and prosperity, and in South African cultures it is associated with mourning and loss.

The colour purple in Japanese and European cultures is often thought to be regal and religious. In the West it is a colour symbolising honour, as opposed to the Brazilian and Thai associations of mourning.

In the West, the colour white is associated with purity and perfection, yet in some Asian cultures, there is a contrast as it reflects death and mourning.

PRACTICE DESIGN

The colour black in Western and European cultures often symbolise death and sombre feelings, whereas in some Eastern cultures, the colour black is considered to be a reflection of good health and wealth.

In healthcare, it is best to consider the use of colours to evoke the right emotions and atmosphere for your clients and staff. Not only taking into consideration the colours cultural appropriation, but also the mental health of all patients and clients. It is recommended to use muted tones appropriately, that may highlight the geographical location of the practice, whilst aligning with your organisations visual branding.

ENTERTAINMENT

Modern medical centres often include the utilisation of entertainment within waiting areas in order to cater for patients and caregivers who may be waiting for long periods of time. The inclusion of entertainment sources reflects the Human Centred approach and empathy to users of the space, however with many diverse cultural values and beliefs, there are certain filters that must be applied to the entertainment supply in medical facilities.

The use of televisions is a common entertainment source located in waiting areas and hospital rooms. In order to mitigate any negative impacts on clients and patients, it is recommended to filter the available channels and shows to viewers.

By doing so, the healthcare environment will not be responsible for showing any on-screen materials that may be deemed as inappropriate or may show negative aspects of religious beliefs.

Similarly, the utilisation of reading materials and magazines should be specifically chosen in order to mitigate any polarised reporting on cultural misconceptions and media. However, it is also important to incorporate reading materials of interest to the general public as a whole, and not chosen with the specific target of a single culture in mind.

Australia is just one of many geographical locations in which we experience a high volume of cultural diversity throughout the population. Due to this, it is important that all organisations, not just within the healthcare sector, but throughout the nation, are aware of how they can impact the client experience through the use of inappropriate colours, images, arrangements and entertainment materials.

The key to developing a healthcare centre in which is culturally diverse and respectful to all clients and patients, is to research the targeted demographics and local communities, and then design accordingly.

When designing and constructing a medical centre that is catering for more than one cultural background or religious belief, it is essential to develop a broad understanding of cultural associations, superstitions, attitudes and behaviours. ©

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For more information contact, please **contact us** for an introduction to **Natassja Wynhorst**.

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