

Business Suit or Hazmat Suit? Which Do I Wear When Visiting Your Practice?

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The first visual impression a patient has of a medical practice is the lobby. Do you know what impression you are making on your patients? As a medical practice consultant, I have seen my share of lobbies through my travels. As a patient, I can recall a time that the lobby was so inviting and comfortable, I did not mind that I had to wait an hour-and-a-half before I went back to see the doctor.

For every nice lobby I have encountered, I have been in plenty that made me feel I needed a tetanus shot as soon as I walked in the door. I have seen paint peeling off the walls, mold growing on ceiling tiles, and chair upholstery ripped to the point where the foam was visible. There have been broken chairs with signs that say “broken” with patients still sitting in them because there were no other seats available. I have seen tile floors caked with so much dirt I could not tell the original tile color, and carpets so stained they were black. I have been in restrooms with no toilet paper and/or paper towels and garbage cans overflowing with trash. The reception windows and walls had signs and papers haphazardly taped everywhere, many of which were outdated, torn or discolored with age.

When I have spoken with a manager or a doctor about creating an inviting lobby, the response I usually receive is they cannot afford fancy lobbies. What many practices fail to understand is they do not need to spend a lot of money with waterfalls, fish tanks, or other amenities. A practice can create a comfortable environment with just the basics. Listed below are tips on creating a comfortable and clean environment.

Daily:

1. Before the practice opens, go out to the lobby and ensure it is neat and tidy. Vacuum carpeted surfaces or sweep tiled/hardwood services.
2. Straighten magazines and place strategically throughout the lobby.
3. Ensure garbage cans are empty and have fresh liners.
4. Stock water/coffee station (if provided) with cups and supplies.
5. Ensure the lobby restroom(s) is clean, fully stocked with toilet paper, paper towels, and soap and the garbage can is empty and has a fresh liner.

6. Check the neatness of the lobby and restroom(s) routinely throughout the day and clean/re-stock as necessary.
7. After doing steps 1-6, open the doors to invite in patients. If you have two doors, don't frustrate patients by locking one of them.

Magazines: Make sure all magazines are current (within 1-2 months). Toss any magazine that becomes tattered prior to its scheduled toss date. Have a good selection for both men and women. Be cautious of the types of articles or the "tone" of the magazine. For example, articles headlines like "How to Sue Your Doctor" are not what you want in your lobby.

Furniture: Chairs should be comfortable and well maintained. Remove or repair any broken chairs immediately. Broken chairs are a liability if a patient is injured. Have upholstered chairs routinely (at least annually) cleaned by professionals. Spot clean between routine cleanings unless stained with body fluids, in which case, have professionals clean it. If bodily fluids are a constant issue due to the nature of the patients, consider vinyl chairs for ease of cleaning and disinfection. Have a few oversized chairs for obese patients.

Flooring: Carpet is a great noise reducer and creates a warm environment, but is easily soiled. Routinely have carpets professionally cleaned (every 6 months or at a minimum annually). Like with the furniture, small stains can be spot cleaned between scheduled cleanings. For stubborn stains or bodily fluids, call a professional carpet cleaner. If the floor is a hard surface, such as wood or tile, have professionals regularly strip, wax, and buff these surfaces. Without routine maintenance, these surfaces look grimy and scuffed, even with regular mopping. Look for, and be cautious of, standing water that can be a slip hazard. Entrance mats help reduce the amount of water coming in on patients' feet, but be sure these mats are large and heavy enough that they do not become a slip/trip hazard themselves.

Signs/Posters: There are many posters practices are required by law to display. Additionally, there are signs practices choose to display regarding co-pays, insurance, etc. Designate one area of the lobby to display all signs and posters. If possible, frame or laminate these signs to maintain a clean, uniform look. At a minimum, replace signs and posters if they begin to curl, show discoloration, become outdated or torn. Contact Medical Practice Services at SVMIC for a list of required posters for your state.

Plants: Live plants present a more natural feel than fake ones. Be sure to regularly water and cut off dead leaves because there is nothing worse than a dead plant in the lobby. Dead plants may lead patients to associate a practice's lack of care for their plants as lack of care for their patients. If the practice is unable to maintain healthy plants, hire a company that specializes in maintaining plants for businesses. Some companies even provide their own plants and switch out any that become sick. If live plants are not an option, use silk plants, but regularly dust the leaves. Dusty fake plants are the equivalent of dead real plants.

Television/Music: When it comes to offering patients the option to watch television, be cautious of the content. Televisions should be set on channels where programming is appropriate for the population and will not likely offend anyone. It is probably best not to display court or reality shows with lots of drama. Also, be cautious of those “free” televisions that run advertising all day, including advertisements by local personal injury attorneys. If patient wait times routinely run long, patients will hear the same message repeatedly. They may begin timing their wait based on how many times they hear the same message, and the item meant to distract them from their wait actually begins to draw their attention to how long they have had to wait. If having a television is not an option, consider playing music in the lobby. Playing a local radio station is free, but if using a streaming service such as Pandora, Spotify, or satellite radio, there are typically special accounts businesses must purchase to use these services.

Just as your staff are a representation of the care you deliver, so is your office environment. With planning and care, a practice can easily create a lobby that projects a welcoming atmosphere. There is only one chance to make a first impression, so make it an inviting one.

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