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Anxieties are eased with a comfort zone

Card swipe, art, good furniture all `customer friendly`

April 13, 2007

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Sometimes the smallest changes are the biggest hit.

Patients at Princess Margaret Hospital's radiation clinic arrive and swipe their appointment cards at the check-in desk. A computer tells them precisely when they'll be seen, simultaneously alerting staff of their arrival.

"Patients love to see their name, that they have been acknowledged in the system," says Faye Montgomery, director of operations for the hospital's radiation medicine program.

That acknowledgement at this world-renowned cancer institution goes much further. Patient comfort is high on the priority list, a fact that shines through during a tour of the facility.

"You have to be customer friendly, because patients are anxious," says the program's visionary, Dr. Mary Gospodarowicz.

Alongside \$4 million in recent cutting-edge developments that make PMH one of the most effective and current radiation providers in the world, updating the "little" touches was put on par with the treatment technology.

"We wanted to break out of the hospital feeling ... (and) make it feel informal as much as possible," says Toronto architect Siamak Hariri, of Hariri Pontarini Architects.

"We spent money on a nice chair," Hariri says of waiting-room furniture. "The whole idea of this place is to get rid of waiting, but for the small amount of time that you are there waiting, it may as well be in a decent chair. It's what you touch, it's what you are (sitting) in, it's your personal space."

They also shrunk the waiting space to allow for private areas and a playroom for the kids who come for radiation each morning from the Hospital for Sick Children just across the street.

Most strikingly obvious is the artwork.

Local philanthropists Joey and Toby Tanenbaum – who donated \$1.5 million to the revitalization project – also kicked in a 13-piece collection of original work by noted Toronto artist Peter Hill.

The biggest atmospheric hurdle, since the space occupies two basement floors without windows, was "trying in small ways to make the environment more humane," Hariri says.

Part of the answer was found in Guelph, Ont., where Barber Glass, in conjunction with DuPont Canada, created glass panels that sandwich digital images of segmented and zig-zagged forestry.

"We didn't want to be literal or cliché, so we did it abstracted and we folded the wall, so it had this kind of playful expression to it," Hariri says.

Other images – mountain landscapes, sunny beaches with palm trees – are embedded in walls and on ceilings above some of the treatment tables while, back in the waiting room, a flat-screen monitor brings the outside in with a loop of nature scenes and wildlife.