Form Follows Function: A Redesigned Pediatric Office

When Texas Children’s Pediatric Associates (TCPA) decided to build an office at Cinco Ranch, a new, upscale planned community in a suburb west of Houston, the practice’s leaders saw the opportunity to create an innovative plan designed to respond to the changing needs of patients, families, and employees. The country’s largest general pediatric group practice, TCPA has almost 160 pediatricians plus 12 nurse practitioners and 40 registered nurses, working at 44 locations and serving about 20 percent of Houston’s children.

Although part of the motivation for the eye-catching new design was to give TCPA a competitive edge in a rapidly growing, relatively affluent area, administrators also intended to field-test the plan and to incorporate successful elements at other sites, where TCPA pediatricians care for a diverse population including residents of some of the city’s most medically underserved areas.

Responding By Redesign

“Issues about convenience and wait time—we were hearing about that loud and clear from our families,” says Kay Tittle, TCPA’s president. The practice hired IDEO, a nationally recognized design firm, to conduct research that included surveying nurses, physicians, and administrators; interviewing patients and their families at home; and shadowing patients during office visits. The company then used the results to design...
a practice setting with unusual features intended to reassure young patients; respond to parents’ concerns about wait times and disease contagion; and create an efficient, congenial work environment for doctors and staff.

Parents’ priorities were easy access and completing each visit quickly. They were willing to wait if their child was sick, but “where they really had angst was waiting for well visits,” Tittle recalls. They were also more worried than administrators had expected about the possibility of transmission of infections—from other children, from shared toys, even from playing on the waiting room carpet.

Staff members wanted a design that facilitated workflow, and many physicians also expressed interest in a layout conducive to job sharing. “The majority of young physicians in the group are women,” Tittle notes. Since TCPA first allowed a pair of pediatricians to share a full-time slot about a decade ago, such partnerships have flourished, and about thirty-six doctors currently job-share. The practice also employs some nurses and medical assistants who work part time or on a per diem basis.

Innovations
The resulting office design strives to streamline patient flow while also creating a welcoming, nonstressful environment for children and their parents. Rather than the old-style waiting room with designated “sick” and “well” sides—an attempt at patient segregation that Tittle says never worked—there is a large, brightly painted waiting room with a central, open reception desk. Glass doors separate the waiting area from the doctors’ and nurses’ main work area, allowing families to watch the activity within.

Internet connectivity permits parents to work while they wait. Instead of carpeting, laminate wood flooring was installed throughout the office, a change that has pleased both families and staff. A separate, smaller waiting room is reserved for newborns and their parents. Fewer toys are provided—and hard-to-clean ones like Legos have been jettisoned—but children can read in a book nook or draw and solve puzzles in an activity cube.

Many children are captivated by the waiting room’s main attraction: an interactive video wall containing four forty-inch digital LCD monitors, with images appearing first on one screen and then cycling onto others. The video wall flashes photos of the practice’s doctors and other staff members wearing clown noses or funny hats, interspersed with other images, such as puppies and teddy bears, and with health messages. Children can snap their own portraits—or take pictures of other kids—by pressing a button in the video wall, then watch as their photos appear on the screens a few minutes later.

“They love looking at their own pictures. Also, they see the staff in a different light, and they feel less intimidated,” says pediatrician Razaali Razak, who works at the Cinco Ranch office.

Beyond the glass doors and main work area, the office is divided into four “pods.” Each pod, used by a single pediatrician-staff team, has four examining rooms and a brightly painted staging area known as the “porch,” with comfortable seating, a scale, and equipment for taking vital
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Signs. A family sees the same doctor or one of a pair, if two pediatricians job-share, and the same team members at each routine visit. Having the porch area facilitates “a nice flow” of patients, says nurse Jennifer McAllister. The porch also provides a quiet spot where, for example, a patient can be observed after receiving an immunization or a parent can wait while the pediatrician sees an adolescent patient alone.

Inside each examining room, the table is equipped with retractable steps that enable young patients to climb up themselves—a feature that helps save the backs of doctors, staff members, and parents. Rooms also have magnetic boards with large stick-on letters and numbers to keep children amused. The practice is making a transition to electronic medical records later this year, and clinicians will have a computer in each waiting room.

Advantages
Tittle says that an added advantage of the porch-and-pod arrangement is that patients and their parents move from the outer waiting area to an inner, more secluded one while waiting to be seen. Although wait times in the newly designed office are not significantly different than at the practice’s other locations, children enjoy the video wall, and parents seem less inclined to complain. “Perception is reality,” Tittle says. The time required for a visit “may be as long as it was somewhere else, but you’re moving, so you feel like you’re making progress.”

Toward the rear of the office, the practice’s physicians have a common work area with separate desks provided for each doctor but without cubicles or individual offices. Four pediatricians usually see patients during each session. During lunch hour, they may work on charting or gather at the work area’s conference table to view a webinar being transmitted to all of TCPA’s locations. The layout encourages professional interaction and camaraderie. “What we heard from our younger physicians was that they wanted some time to be with their colleagues,” Tittle says.

The Cinco Ranch office occupies substantial space in its current building, including first-floor entry to the practice and adjacent ground-level parking. A treatment room can be entered directly from the parking lot, affording quick access to patients who arrive by ambulance or who need immediate interventions. In the past, notes Dr. Razak, pediatricians used to leave the office during the day to attend emergency cesarean sections. Now, with neonatologists available at most hospitals, having the office close to where families live has become a higher priority than having it close to the hospital. “We are located right in the neighborhood, very close to most of our patients,” he says.

Spreading The Innovations
About thirty-five of TCPA’s forty-four locations were acquired by purchasing existing practices, and existing space and layouts limit the degree to which the new design can be adopted elsewhere. But certain elements—such as the elimination of carpeting, the video wall, the provision of a separate waiting area for newborns, and the retractable steps for examining tables—have been such standout successes that TCPA is moving to replicate them wherever possible.

Five TCPA locations are designated as Project Medical Homes, located in underserved areas and dedicated to providing care regardless of families’ ability to pay. The office at Corinthian Pointe, the most recently opened of these, incorporates the bright colors, open waiting room layout, and other elements of the new design, while also offering special services such as an on-site social worker and programs in health education and literacy.