

The Case for Including Friends and Family in the Healing Process

Key Insights

- **Evidence shows that welcoming families into the patient room is good for patients, family members, caregivers, and healthcare organizations.**
- **Having a support person in the room appears to improve patient safety – reducing overall costs.**
- **The patient’s guests can improve communication and understanding between the patient and caregivers.**
- **Family support during treatment is linked to higher patient satisfaction scores.**
- **Creating family zones in patient rooms encourages guests to be part of the healing process around the clock.**

Not so long ago, the friends and family of hospital patients had to abide by strict visiting hours. Today, many healthcare organizations are taking a different approach, welcoming guests to stay around the clock as a key part of the patient care team.

This about-face is being driven by mounting evidence that shows the support of guests can help healthcare organizations meet their goals. From improving patient outcomes to reducing costs, the most valuable thing a healthcare organization can add to a patient room may be a “welcome mat” for family and friends.

For starters, having a familiar face and hand to hold night and day is simply what many patients want. Susan Frampton, president of the nonprofit patient-centered organization Planetree, says, “Across regions, cultures, generations and other demographics, certain hallmark patient-centered practices... consistently surface as the way patients want their healthcare delivered. They don’t want to be needlessly (and somewhat arbitrarily) separated from their loved ones....They want their loved ones to be supported to take on aspects of their care and care management.”¹

Recent studies show many other compelling reasons to give families a place in the healing process—and the patient’s room.

Research Summary

Patient Safety

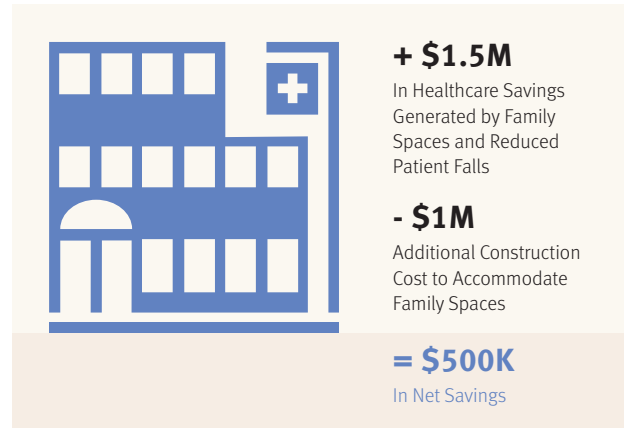
While every healthcare organization strives for a perfect safety record, the statistics for serious-injury falls are sobering. A recent study at three Midwestern hospitals found they increased the length of inpatient stays by 6.9 days and hospital charges by \$13,806.²

However, researchers have identified a surprisingly effective way to prevent these falls. In a 2012 study, data showed there are roughly half as many falls in patient rooms with a designated family area as there are in rooms with no designated family area.³

In another study, following a renovation to create large, single-bed rooms at Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis, families spent more time with the patients, and falls were cut by two-thirds.^{4 5} In fact, the Fable Hospital 2.0 analysis, which envisioned an ideal environment for patient care, revealed that adding space to accommodate families adds an estimated \$1,000,000 to construction costs—but those same family/social spaces contribute to a savings of \$1,534,166 in reduced patient falls.⁶

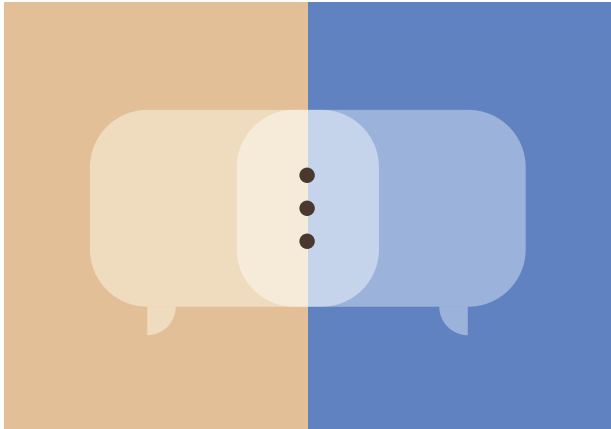
The evidence is so strong that in 2011, the American Association of Critical Care Nurses added the following statement to its PracticeAlert™: “The unrestricted presence and participation of a support person can enhance patient and family satisfaction because it improves the safety of care.”⁷

In addition to preventing falls, family presence has been linked to reducing the patient’s anxiety, decreasing the chance of medical error, relieving staff by providing non-clinical patient assistance, and providing an added layer of security.⁸ Numerous studies also demonstrate the value of family to patients’ engagement in medical decision-making,⁹ treatment adherence,¹⁰ quality of healthcare processes^{11,12}, physical and mental health,¹³ and mortality.¹⁴



“The unrestricted presence and participation of a support person can enhance patient and family satisfaction because it improves the safety of care.”

– American Association of Critical Care Nurses



Enhanced Communication

Having family members in the patient room may also improve communication between the patient and caregivers, particularly if the patient is a child or unable to speak or think clearly. Often, the family can share information about the patient's history or typical behavior, helping caregivers understand how the patient's mental or physical status may be changing. The Institute for Patient-Centered Design backs up this idea, saying, "Unrestricted presence of a support person can improve communication, facilitate a better understanding of the patient, advance patient- and family-centered care, and enhance staff satisfaction."⁸

Another study suggests that family companions can influence the quality of patients' healthcare in several ways, including:

- Facilitating information transfer and coherent service use across time and healthcare settings,
- Motivating patients to adhere to treatment regimens on a daily basis,
- Initiating contact with health professionals to report on emerging conditions or symptom exacerbation.
- Advocating on behalf of patients for services, benefits, and provider attentiveness to patients' preferences and needs.¹⁵



Higher Patient Satisfaction

While patient satisfaction has always been an important factor in the competitive healthcare market, it's now more crucial than ever to an organization's success. With the passage of the Affordable Care Act, Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement is now linked to patient satisfaction scores, and raising these HCAHPS (Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems) scores can help boost an organization's bottom line.

One effective way to do so may be to invite the family into the patient room. According to a 2008 report,¹⁶ numerous studies demonstrate the relevance of family presence to satisfaction with physician care. The Fable Hospital 2.0 analysis supports this idea by suggesting, "Family support and involvement in patient care can enhance clinical outcomes and increase satisfaction with the hospital experience."⁶

Creating a Welcoming Space

Given all of this evidence, the case for welcoming families into the healing process is clear. But what exactly does a “welcoming space” look like, and how can an organization make use of evidence-based design to create a space that encourages families to stay nearby?

According to the Fable Hospital 2.0 analysis, “Hospitals can foster these benefits by incorporating family gathering spaces, such as dining and kitchen spaces, business centers, and sleeping rooms.”⁶ An increasing number of critical care units are cultivating a more patient- and family-centered culture by providing comfortable family zones in patient rooms and family areas in public areas that encourage family presence and involvement.^{17, 18, 19, 20, 21}

With new construction, extra space can be incorporated to accommodate family members. The 2010 Guidelines for the Design and Construction of Healthcare Facilities now provide specific design provisions for patient- and family-centered rooms, including an additional minimum of 30 square feet per family member, and a home-like atmosphere²². The Fable Hospital 2.0 analysis suggests even more space for guests, citing a study that says, “Increasing room size by 100 square feet allows family members to stay overnight with the patient, increasing their satisfaction and involvement in care.”²³

In existing spaces, organizations need to look for other ways to welcome families within the limited footprint of the patient room. One study suggests that a designated family area with recliners, sofa beds, and sofa bed drawers may increase the perception that family members are welcome and encouraged to remain close to their loved one and to stay longer.²⁴

Evidence-based design has also led healthcare furniture designers to develop more complete family-centered solutions. What began with recliners and convertible sleep sofas has grown into more activity-based planning to address the needs of guests around the clock. Today’s patient rooms might include tables and integrated power and data that let guests work, eat, and entertain themselves, dedicated storage to keep personal items out of the way of caregivers, and seating options that let guests adjust their proximity to the patient.

“Increasing room size by 100 square feet allows family members to stay overnight with the patient, increasing their satisfaction and involvement in care.”

— The Fable Hospital 2.0 Analysis

The importance of families in the healing process is becoming more widely recognized around the world, with research showing their presence can be an effective tool for improving patient outcomes, communication, and satisfaction, and reducing costs. As more organizations open the door to family involvement, expect a continuing evolution of solutions that make them feel welcome in the patient room and encourage them to stay around the clock.

Research Summary

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