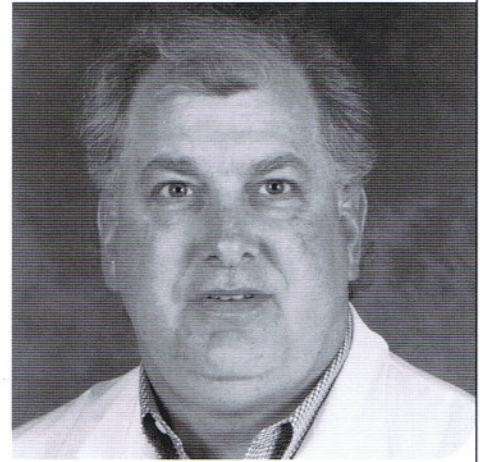


## A Better Office, By Design

by John T. Murphy, MD

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It's hard for physicians to admit that we may not be experts in every aspect of our practices — particularly the day-to-day operations we are so close to. But I know from real-life experience that my colleagues and I cannot duplicate the expertise of the professionals we hired to design our new offices, who helped us make significant strides in the efficiencies of our daily activities and in the success of the practice overall.

About 10 years ago, our physician group struck out on its own to start an orthopedic practice. At the outset we all felt that we knew exactly how the new office should be constructed and run. But we soon learned we had no concept of office design, no ideas for easing patient flow, no concrete thoughts about how much space we'd really need — or even how many seats to put in the waiting room — all of the nuances that an expert in medical facility design can provide to improve your efficiency and make a positive difference in your patients' satisfaction.

The success of our practice today is a result of our partnership with an experienced architectural and design firm that most certainly knows as much about the mechanics of patient flow and office efficiency as we physicians know about diagnosing and treating illness. Several potential design partners had simply offered us a boilerplate design and asked how many

square feet we wanted. The one we eventually chose first studied our practice and then provided what we needed, using less space than we physicians had estimated.

### Ideas come to life

Our design firm studied physician practice patterns and the average number of patients and visitors who would circulate through our office during any half-day session. They used this information to design multiple, comfortable waiting areas that reduce bottlenecks at physician workstations, the X-ray department, and the cast room. A raised roof with windows allows indirect natural light to stream in; it has become the focal point of our facility and generates more compliments from patients than any other feature.

A lighting system outside the exam rooms helps physicians see patients in the correct order and gives the physician the ability to call for assistance from inside the room, improving both the physician's and the nurse's use of valuable practice time. Patient flow is based on estimates of volume and the work pace of individual physicians. Floor plans reflect both patient and physician needs. Even the number of parking spaces was given careful consideration. In all, we minimized square footage and eliminated wasted space to make virtually every inch of our office functional and productive.

Our group has now gone back to the same firm for two additions and a new satellite office (which is simply a smaller version of our original design). Over time we have learned that the concepts we first knew nothing about — thoughtful office design, enhanced patient flow, smart use of space — have proven to be the reasons our facility allows a single physician to comfortably see over 30 patients in every half-day appointment session. The focus is always on patient comfort and physician efficiency.

Simply put, designing a medical office should be left to the experts, whose knowledge and experience will translate into a comfortable, efficient work environment. As my group has found, this not only makes the day-to-day practice easier, but brings long-term benefits as well. When you move patients through the office so that they feel constantly attended, it provides a positive experience that they will share with others. A smooth-running, less-stressed workplace will give you the edge in recruiting new physicians and retaining staff. The results are immediate cost savings and long-term returns in the form of a more productive practice. ■

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