

PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

PREMIUM OFFICE DESIGN

Increasing your office space can create a more complementary setting for patients

by Sean Henahan in Budapest

Premium office design is an essential consideration in creating a premium practice. At a Practice Development Workshop held during the 14th ESCRS Winter Meeting, two leading ophthalmic surgeons described their experiences of moving into new clinic space when they outgrew their original facilities.

Erik Mertens MD had run out of space. His successful practice in an Antwerp suburb was quickly growing beyond its 325 square metres of space.

"I needed a bigger space. All of the rooms were packed with equipment and our patient flow was starting to jam. We couldn't get to our patients fast enough. Everyone was annoyed - staff, surgeons, and our patients," Dr Mertens recalled.

By chance a building became available that offered 2500 square metres of space. But what would he do with all that room?

"It was a huge difference. When I bought the place I was originally going to use 600 square metres for my practice, and rent out the rest. I thought I could create a medical centre, maybe rent out to gynaecologists, orthopaedists and so on. But I realised I would not gain from having those specialists nearby, nor would they gain much from me."

Instead, he created a medical centre catering to the same demographic he would be treating, the ageing, otherwise healthy baby-boomers. The Medipolis medical centre now includes his own ophthalmic surgery practice including an ambulatory surgery centre. However, it also includes cosmetic plastic surgeons, a hair replacement specialist, an anti-ageing specialist, dentists, a hearing aid shop, and an optical shop and also a pharmacy and beauty salon.

This creates a more complementary setting for everyone. Patients coming in for refractive surgery might also be candidates for cosmetic dentistry and vice versa. Patients also appreciate the 'one-stop shopping' where they can see the ophthalmologists and then pick up their prescription drops or their new glasses in the same building, he noted.

Establishing a new practice or expanding an existing practice requires a lot of planning and a little soul searching as well.

"There are a lot of things you need to think about. What do you need to do your job? How many rooms? What kind of waiting area and so on. You also want to consider how to provide a premium service atmosphere.



Erik Mertens expanded his ophthalmic practice which now includes a comfortable reception and waiting area



Sheraz Daya recently expanded his practice into a purpose-built facility in West Sussex, offering patients a premium experience

"I told my architect I didn't want a clinic atmosphere, I wanted the patients to feel at home and at ease. We wanted them to feel that they were treated as people, not as numbers."

The new ophthalmic centre, now complete, has a comfortable reception and waiting area filled with comfortable and stylish furniture. Patients can have a cup of coffee and read a magazine, watch a DVD or go online either through the available WI-FI or by logging on to one of the flat screen Internet systems.

There are actually four waiting areas, so when one starts to get full, patients are guided to another area. Flat screens in each area also display services offered by the clinic.

"We give a lot of information to our patients. We have patient coordinators who explain the different surgical procedures. We like to use the Eyemaginations computer programs as well."

The ophthalmic practice now includes four receptionists, two patient coordinators,

technicians, two office managers and a general manager. All of these personnel not only smooth the workflow, Dr Mertens said, they allow him to do what he does best, practice medicine.

First-class facilities for first-class clients

Sheraz Daya MD recently expanded his practice into a purpose-built facility in a rural setting in West Sussex not far from London. This was a culmination of a voyage of self discovery, years of hard work, and a necessity, since his practice based at the National Health Service Hospital in East Grinstead was bursting at the seams.

"You want to think about what makes you tick when setting up practice. I had worked in one of the first laser centres in the UK. But I didn't like what I was doing, didn't like working for somebody else as a hired gun. I wanted to do something myself, so I set up my own centre."

At first he mimicked the competition, trying to attract large numbers of patients in an effort to create a high-volume business. Then he realised that he should capitalise on his own skills and abilities rather than trying to be like everyone else. Rather than compete for price shoppers, he decided to target patients who wanted premium service and had the means to pay for it.

He put his plan into action in 2001, and his business improved by 250 per cent in one year. He opened a bigger premises in 2003, and more recently opened the new hospital in the countryside.

"When we started planning our new facility the idea was to provide a first-class experience for all - staff and patients. Every detail mattered in terms of aesthetics and design and also in providing the right sort of experience going through the system, if patients are going to spend a lot of money on premium IOLs everything else has to be premium as well.

There can also be no compromise in terms of technology, he emphasised. This means using the best diagnostic and therapeutic technology available. For example, an IOLMaster is vital for optimum results with multifocal IOLs. Similarly, the femtosecond laser has become the new gold standard for laser vision correction.

"The premium experience starts at the initial phone contact, then continues with the first impression when they see the place, and continues through to a successful procedure and follow-up. The word of mouth is phenomenal for marketing your practice. Vision correcting surgery is a life-changing experience and patients will spread the word. But this won't happen unless you provide a premium experience," Dr Daya said.

Dr Daya's Centre for Sight has locations in London as well as East Grinstead with a third unit due to open in neighbouring Surrey in August 2010.