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FURNISHINGS AND FIXTURES

Inside the Patient Room

Three Evaluation Guidelines to Consider for Patient Chairs

By Doug Bazuin

According to the National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care 2006 Survey, every year there are over 15.3 million people whose conditions require hospital admission. Whether the person in this situation is a patient or caregiver, there is one item that affects the experience—the patient chair.

The patient chair is essential to the recovery process. In fact, caregivers routinely measure a patient's ability to sit successfully in a chair as an indicator that the patient may be discharged safely. Since, according to the CDC, the average length of stay in a hospital is about 4.8 days, employing a chair that supports patients comfortably—allowing them to remain in the chair longer—may impact the number of hours or days they remain hospitalized.

Overall, the chair should contribute to a better experience for patients and become an effective tool for caregivers. To achieve this level, healthcare leaders should focus on three qualities of a patient chair: comfort, function and durability.

Comfort

Comfort is ranked as the most important chair attribute for patients and caregivers. So how does one measure comfort? Caregivers are able to determine a patient's comfort according to the frequency of his or her adjustment within the chair, which could be triggered by the chair's hard front edge impairing circulation or heat buildup in an overstuffed chair seat and back.

Overstuffed patient recliners, for example, are perceived as comfortable but often fail to provide appropriate, ergonomic support. In fact, they often are

bolstered with pillows to even out the support and adjust the contour. Without a contoured seat and back to offer even and con-



stant support, the patient will experience uneven pressure distribution and, consequently, discomfort.

This does not imply that reclining is bad for the patient. In fact, postural variation is a critical function of the patient chair. For

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patients in weakened states, it is essential that chairs easily adjust and recline. However, the adjustment mechanisms of these chairs must

be within a patient's reach and easy to use. The mechanisms must also be conveniently located for the caregiver who most often assists patients in and out of a chair.

Comfort extends to the psychological state too. A sense of well-being, relief and relaxation is associated with being comfortable. If patients can sit longer, in a comfortable chair, that provides advantages to their physical and mental recovery.

Function

The patient chair needs to address caregiver and patient safety. Consequently, the American Nurses Association states that more than one-third of back injuries among nursing personnel are associated with the handling of patients and the frequency with which nurses are required to move patients manually.

Four patient chair features address this issue and may lower the risk of injury:

- 1. Armrest design.** Armrests should be designed with ingress and egress in mind. This includes the length and angle of the armrest. Pivoting armrests allow caregiver access to the patient; wider armrests give patients a comfortable place to rest their arms; soft materials provide a better gripping surface.
- 2. Foot space under the chair.** Often a place for integrated footrests, the space under the chair ideally should allow patients to plant their feet under the seat as a means to shift their weight or get out of the chair.
- 3. Seat height.** A low seat height will allow patients to place their feet on the floor to assist ingress and egress.
- 4. Recline controls.** The controls must be easy to use and conveniently located for both

the caregiver and the patient. Ideally, there will be controls on both sides of the chair so a patient with weakness on one side can use the controls and feel a measure of independence, which also contributes to the recovery process.

These features will allow caregivers to assist patients in and out of the chair and make their jobs easier and safer.

Durability

The patient population varies in size and stature. And, according to the National Care for Health Statistics, approximately 66% of the population age 20 and over is overweight or obese. A chair that accommodates a weight load over 250 pounds, while still providing comfortable ergonomic support, may be used safely by a greater number of people.

Chairs should have fabrics and surfaces that are durable and hold up under the steady use experienced in a patient room.

And those fabrics and surfaces must withstand hospital cleaning protocols. Patients are susceptible to hospital-acquired infections, which can pose serious risk to them and serious liability for healthcare organizations. While consistent hand washing by caregivers and staff can significantly reduce hospital-acquired infections, it makes sense that products designed for thorough cleaning should help minimize the spread of infection.

Chairs with gaps and cracks easily attract dirt and make cleaning more difficult. Chairs that are designed for thorough and easy cleaning are an asset to a healthcare organization. And housekeeping staff also should be able to move the chair, making it easier to clean the entire patient room.

Conclusion

Patient care too easily is hindered by obstacles and distractions. When prod-

ucts get in the way or when patients aren't able to heal in the best environments, then quality of care is compromised. That's one compromise few are willing to accept.

Caregivers understand that getting their patients out of bed and up and around is important to their recuperation and their emotional state. Providing patients with chairs that are comfortable and supportive is good for them, as is providing caregivers with a patient chair that is a productive and functional work tool. Finding the balance between what helps the caregiver and what helps the patient without compromising one for the other is what a patient chair needs to do

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PATIENT CHAIR CHECKLIST

Comfort

- In what department will the chair serve? Are there unique requirements for the chairs in this department?
- Who else will sit in the chair, other than patients?
- How long will patients sit in the chair?
- Does the chair provide lower back support for good posture and comfort?
- Does the chair need to fully recline?
- Will a partial recline achieve the objectives you have for patients?

Function

- What features of the chair address patient safety?
- Do the arms move out of the way to make it easy for caregivers to access?
- Does the chair accommodate a wide variety of sizes and shapes?
- What features does the chair have that will help caregivers perform their jobs?
- How easy is it for the patient to get into and out of the chair?

Durability

- Is the chair designed in a way that makes it easy to clean?
- What is the weight tolerance of the chair?
- Will the materials withstand cleaners and disinfectants?
- Is the chair easy to move?
- What is the warranty on the chair?

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