

Architects, aged care providers & mental health

WHEN ARCHITECTS AND AGED CARE PROVIDERS SIT DOWN TO DISCUSS FACILITY DESIGN, BED NUMBERS, SERVICE PROVISION AND CARE NEEDS ARE USUALLY TOP CONVERSATION POINTS. BUT WHAT ABOUT THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF RESIDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DEMENTIA? AGED CARE DESIGN EXPERT, CATH MUHLEBACH, EXPLAINS WHY SHE BELIEVES HER COLLEAGUES AND AGED CARE CLIENTS SHOULD CONSIDER MENTAL WELLNESS AS A KEY FACILITY DESIGN PRIORITY.



DESIGNING residential aged care facilities to promote the positive mental well-being of older people is complicated.

The challenge is to create one structure – a care facility – to adequately house a variety of services to a number of residents, each with differing emotional and physical health needs and levels of cognition. Some residents may be physically declining but mentally alert, while others might be affected by conditions such as dementia, depression or anxiety. That is why good facility design must balance the needs of all residents and cater for the ‘whole person’.

There is a growing focus on the mental and physical well-being of residents and an increasing awareness that the built environment can impact both the resident’s body and mind. Quality design must also consider care service delivery, daily service and utilities management requirements and suppliers’ needs.

In our experience, operators are putting a great deal of thought into facility designs. But perhaps not with enough emphasis on designing structures that promote good mental health and wellness principles.

The efficiency of care, OH&S and the cost of development may win out over other design considerations.

That is why it is imperative for aged care providers to place greater emphasis on the mental health needs of residents and staff when designing their facilities.

WE NEED TO TALK

The fact is we – as a community and profession – don’t talk about mental health issues enough. Conversations at the design table tend to focus on bed numbers and service provision rather than the broader vision and amenity. Fault is probably on both sides.

Concern about the cost implications, such as

the utility of developing additional facilities to provide diversity of experience, and also the ease with which aspects can be addressed in the design without additional cost are part of the challenge.

Possible lack of awareness about the specific benefits of designing for mental health and the quantum difference it can make is also a real factor which I hope is being relegated to the past.

There is also a tendency to design to the same ‘brief’ of physical areas because it has worked previously but designing for mental health doesn’t necessarily have to increase the area. It is a matter of considering how things could be done, or refreshed to compliment the approaches that have proven successful in the past.

The best designs, which cater for the varied mental health needs of a wide-ranging resident group, are just as varied as the individual residents themselves.

It is critical that operators understand the breadth and diverse needs of residents as a challenge important enough to meet.

PLEASING EVERYONE, ALL OF THE TIME

So how do you create a facility that caters for every resident’s mental health needs and the care requirements of facility operators?

Designing for mental health incorporates

some of the things designers consider for dementia design such as clear way-finding, simple circulation, safety and security. But pure dementia design does not necessarily create the types of spaces that residents without dementia would choose to inhabit. Such designs have the potential to become quite clinical or neutral to maintain functionality.

For example the lack of pattern and texture, and dementia specific bathrooms, are designed for clinical and utility needs but they are considerably different to standard ones in the community.

It is crucial that any design cares for the whole person. A strategic approach to the planning and design of aged care and independent living facilities should involve the potential to deliver many long-term benefits to residents, staff and operators.

The most popular and vibrant aged care facilities not only have high quality architectural design but also provide mental and physical care within a sensitive and stable environment. Environments should be calm spaces which support residents. At varying times they may require support with varying aids, but preferably without being overly institutional or clinical.

Ideally, if a space is sensitively designed it offers opportunities for individual areas to be configured to support fluctuating numbers of people as various activities are undertaken throughout the seasons, the week or the day. Sensitive design is of course not just a concept specific to aged care communities – it applies to the design needs



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DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

HOW TO PROMOTE MENTAL WELLBEING VIA AGED CARE DESIGN

- Connect facilities with the outdoors. For example: views, and rooms that open up to decks/gardens;
- Use good levels of natural light and where possible natural ventilation;
- Include spaces that support social interaction such as sitting areas which open onto corridors and allow for unplanned interactions with passers-by;
- Consider locations to view activities throughout the passage of a day;
- Avoid double-loaded corridors lined with bedroom doors to ensure circulation through the facility is enjoyable;
- Provide different types of spaces, like themed sitting areas with an individualised character and feel;
- Personalise bedrooms space and fixtures;
- Provide residents with richness of experience such as access and choices offered at a café, cinema or library; and
- Support community spaces that can enable all residents to gather for an event.

of the broader community also.

Possibly, the most important step in determining the best way to meet the mental health needs of residents involves identifying the potential resident profiles and the associated care objectives. It is difficult to develop a facility design that caters for the mental health needs of residents without proper analysis of those living within it. A successful design must be based on a combination of research that is discussed openly by operators.

BEST PRACTICE COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

In my experience, planning group meetings to develop a brief and test design concepts from masterplan through to the detail of each space, are critical. Within existing facilities, working with staff to identify their understanding of positives and negatives is valuable as is input from residents, and even their families, about what they like and what makes a positive contribution in their experience.

Operators who analyse their own facility but also venture out to visit other facilities to consider what works well are often the most successful. The lessons learnt from previous projects, which can be shared between an architect and operator, as well as

carers, will ensure the best possible results.

To obtain information about what users really need, operators and architects must collaborate and move forward to create a more vibrant community that better supports their holistic needs. To successfully collaborate, all parties must allow time to develop and test a design and provide reasonable opportunity for all relevant stakeholders to review and contribute ideas.

Quality design is best done by testing ideas on paper and with prototype rooms, so adjustments can be made. A collaborative approach allows for a strong working relationship to be formed where a designer, or operator, are not afraid to reassess a design to achieve better outcomes.

Considered design can reduce the unease felt by residents as they transition into a less familiar environment. Quality design can present them with a variety of lifestyle options in which they can establish new social connections.

It is important that operators and designers remember an aged care facility is first and foremost a home and it should have a sense of life and hope, which adds positively to the physical and mental health of residents. **HA**

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CASE STUDY

PROM COUNTRY AGED CARE, FOSTER, NSW, BY CLARKEHOPKINSCLARKE

The design of Prom Country Aged Care is an example of how best practice design, achieved via communication and collaboration between an architect and aged care provider, can cater for the mental health needs of residents. The design features the Prom Country’s Men’s Shed program, which was purposefully created to enable residents to gather for activities, which benefit their emotional and mental health.