

## Specialized Design of Facilities for Alzheimer Patients

**Long-term care facilities for people with cognitive impairment have been established over the past 30 years. They only admit people with dementia, have a specially trained staff, and offer activities that are appropriate for the cognitively impaired. Now, as experts have gained a better understanding of dementia, interest has in-**

**creased in creating physical environments designed specifically for people with Alzheimer disease (AD). The goal in providing these specialized environments is to promote such aspects of life as independence, improved function, and appropriate behavior. So, what makes certain designs more appropriate for AD facilities?**

### Architecture

The typical residential facility—patterned after a hospital, with long corridors, a central dining area, and large multipurpose rooms—can be overwhelming or confusing for someone with AD. Such facilities offer little privacy for residents, and tend to have an institutional feel.

As an alternative, the growing trend is to use a cluster design that separates living spaces into small areas, each with its own entry, living room, dining room, kitchen, and bedroom. The idea is to create a more home-like environment that is easier to navigate. High-risk areas, such as kitchens, remain visible or easily accessible to the staff.

These new facilities also differentiate between private and public spaces, which can help reduce inappropriate behavior. For example, bedrooms that open onto a hallway instead of the living room may make residents less likely to walk into a public area while wearing nightclothes. And bathrooms are often provided in each bedroom to help maintain dignity.

### Interior Design

The interior design of an AD facility is centered around safety, comfort, and mobility. For example, low-pile carpeting may be used to help prevent falls—and provide some cushioning if a resident does fall. Features such as sturdy handrails can enhance residents' mobility. And the furnishings, wall treatments, and lighting all help

contribute to a home-like atmosphere.

Lighting is especially important not only because many people with AD have impaired vision, but also because some experts believe that either too little or too much bright light can increase agitation. A combination of natural and artificial light should be used to increase the overall lighting level without creating glare. In addition, contrasting colors are used to enhance residents' visual function. For example, light entryways and dark doorjambs help people differentiate between a door and its frame. Contrast can be equally useful in distinguishing between walls and the floor, or the floor and furniture.

Acoustics are also important since many older people have some degree of hearing loss, and excessive noise can increase agitation. Noise levels are often reduced with special materials for the floor, walls, and ceiling. And personal electronic paging systems may be used instead of intrusive public address systems.

Finally, design can also provide “cues and clues” to help people find their way. For example, a hanging quilt or a grandfather clock may be used to differentiate one part of the facility from another. Windows with outdoor views give a clue as to location, as do hallway windows that open onto other spaces, such as a dining room.

Recessed display cases outside each bedroom may showcase per-

sonal items to help residents locate their own rooms.

### Outdoors

Alzheimer facilities encourage wandering—common to many people with AD. For example, there may be a special path consisting of interconnected loops to help confused people cover large areas without getting lost or becoming frustrated. An alarm system is kept in place to alert the staff if residents leave the grounds.

In general, outdoor spaces are maintained as pleasant places for exercise and socializing. There may be a birdbath or fountain, as well as comfortable chairs and shaded areas for rest. Trees and flowers provide a sense of seasonal change, but because people with late-stage dementia often put things in their mouths, all plants are nontoxic.

### How Important Is Design?

Design is not the only thing you should look for when selecting a long-term care facility. Cynthia Steele, M.P.H., R.N., co-director of Copper Ridge, a Johns Hopkins-affiliated nursing facility, points out that design is “one component of an effective treatment approach,” but warns against placing too much emphasis on it. The most important things an Alzheimer's facility can provide are a safe environment and a caring, well-trained staff. Still, these design innovations are a step toward more specialized care for AD patients.

testinal disturbances (for example, bleeding and ulcers) can be severe. Further careful studies are needed before such a recommendation can be made.