

BUILDING PATIENT PRIVACY INTO OFFICE DESIGN

Our expert details the delicate balance between trendy open-concept office design and the importance of patient privacy.



You've probably been hearing the term "open concept design" for years. It's made its way into every real estate-related program on HGTV and nearly every conversation most designers have with clients. And for good reason – people love freedom of movement, whether real or perceived. But Laura Grundmeier, an NCIDQ-certified interior design professional, has a unique challenge: delivering open-concept design without compromising the privacy of the patients served.

Dental office design

The term "open concept" might feel ubiquitous, but when specifically applied to a dental office, you start to see how its meaning is tailored to the environment.

"When you talk about open-concept design, you're talking about removing some walls and visual barriers to create a better flow in and out of operatories," Grundmeier said. "We are seeing more and more dental furniture built to help support this design. For instance, instead of having two cabinets, teams can share resources with one cabinet that is designed to create a dividing wall between rooms."

Grundmeier said that while not every office is perfect for an open concept design, there are certainly some applications that work well.

"It works well in areas where you're not going to be having personal or private conversations, or putting patients in vulnerable positions, like in oral surgery," Grundmeier said. "Many practices with a more open plan have a consultation room to discuss things like billing or treatment plans."





Patient privacy

Inherent in any discussion about opening up your space is the idea that there are serious risks involved. HIPAA violations, for one. As such, Grundmeier's task is to find ways to make workspaces feel more open without exposing office staff to potential problems.

"One great way to keep a space visually open is to integrate glass into the design," Grundmeier said. "Often, the glass will run on the outside of the room to keep patients out of view, but allow light to flow through."

Some offices simply don't have the extra space to build a consultation room. In those circumstances, Grundmeier suggests noise-dampening material and soffits to create a truly intimate space that doesn't sacrifice an open feel.

"A lot of times, we'll build ceiling walls down to the cabinetry, creating a hard wall that closes off space between operatories, but still keeps the integrity of the open concept," she said. "Plus, with the acoustic products available today, you can absorb a lot of the sound that would otherwise travel."

The important thing to remember is that regardless of your concern, the workarounds are almost limitless.

"There are so many possible solutions that depend on the unique needs of a doctor and practice," Grundmeier said. "As a designer, my main concern is that we're helping the team reach its goals, so we look forward to the opportunity to have conversations and develop designs that alleviate concerns."