



Enhancing Patient Experience



Improving Clinical Outcomes



Managing Cost of Care



Ensuring Staff Satisfaction

## This NICU is Like None You've Ever Seen

Having a baby who requires care in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) is a frightening prospect for families. It is one that often provokes visions of sterile rooms filled with complex equipment and hospital staff rushing back and forth. In recognition of the impact that care environments have on physical and emotional health, a growing number of hospitals are designing family first NICUs, with features that improve the care experience in multiple ways – from light and sound to comfort and convenience.

Neonatologist Dr. Robert White recently conducted a tour of South Bend Memorial Hospital's new NICU highlighting features they have incorporated to make the unit a better place for babies, parents and staff. According to White, the unit's design was the result of a collaborative effort among designers, NICU staff members and patients' families.

### Bringing in light

Throughout South Bend Memorial Hospital's new NICU, designers have found ways to bring in natural light and incorporate other elements of nature. The entrance to the unit features an atrium that looks down upon a nature-themed play area for the pediatrics unit. The NICU was built so that each patient room either overlooks this atrium or an outside space via an external window.

"It's a hospital, there will be stressors but there's a place to escape to pretty easily where you can access nature and sunlight," said White.

Light is a key consideration through the NICU, with each patient room containing bedside procedural lighting and a wall washed with colorful light where the family can select which color to project.

With regards to color, White and the design team learned a valuable lesson when attempting to select paint colors for the new unit. He states:

"We initially picked out colors that were muted, soft, pastels, and we ran that idea past the families who said they wanted brighter colors. That's an important lesson we learned - including families at every step of the process enriches the design."

### Soothing sounds

Hospitals can be noisy places where patients and families are subjected to sounds from hallways, other patient rooms and staff workspaces. The patient rooms in South Bend Memorial Hospital's NICU have a number of noise control features, from acoustical ceiling tiles to quietly running breast milk refrigerators. Ambient sound levels in the rooms range from 35-45 decibels.

Recognizing how trash removal by environmental services is another source of unwanted sound, with carts entering and exiting rooms, the NICU patient rooms at South Bend Memorial Hospital

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are designed so that trash and linen removal can be done from outside of the room. The disposal bins are built into the walls so that patients and nursing staff can access them from the inside of the room, while environmental services staff can access them from outside.

## Private retreats

White notes how he and the designers wanted to create a “home away from home” for families of NICU babies, with patient rooms that promote privacy, comfort and convenience.

Each single room features a sliding glass door that separates the patient care area from the family area. The family area of the room contains a two-person sofa bed, television and work area with desk. This allows family members to take a break, a nap or get some work done while spending time with their baby. Each room also contains a full bathroom, refrigerator and other amenities.

The double rooms feature everything that the single rooms contain, but with a second bed position that can be used for either a second baby or the mother herself. The secondary bed is aligned with all codes required for post-partum care, and could even serve as a delivery area. That way, a mother could remain with her baby at all times throughout the care continuum. The double rooms can also be connected to single or other double rooms to accommodate the care of triplets or quads all in one space.

## A sense of community

While most families in the NICU want privacy, many also want the opportunity to interact with other families in the unit. The first thing a family sees when it enters South Bend Memorial Hospital's NICU is a landscaped balcony, which is a family gathering area outside of the unit itself.

Immediately upon entering the unit is a family lounge, which is set up with a full kitchen, dining area, a kids' play area for siblings, and a deck so that families can gather outside on nice days.

“We have set this up in a way that we want it to feel like a neighborhood. Like you are walking down a street in your community rather than a corridor in a hospital,” White says.

## Staff support and care

Those healthcare providers working in the NICU face tremendous physical and emotional challenges when caring for their tiny, fragile patients. Therefore, the designers of South Bend Memorial Hospital's NICU incorporated features to support staff as they perform their life-saving work. This includes a staff lounge with access to the outdoors, a nap room, a “Zen” room with a massage chair, and a pump room for nurses who are lactating.

The unit also incorporates multiple areas for nurses to perform charting, including work stations at the head wall of each bedside, stations outside of each patient room where nurses have visualization to the babies without disrupting the families, and central nurses' stations.

“The central nurses' station also provides an area where nurses can collaborate,” said White. “In private rooms nurses can feel as isolated as much as families do sometimes.”

If you would like to experience the tour, click [here](#) to view the video.

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