

# Three Steps to Choosing the Right Wallcovering



By Rebecca Donner

Over the last decade, designers of healthcare facility interiors have moved away from traditional wallpaper and are reshaping healthcare design standards as a result. Today's wallcoverings go way beyond "wallpaper" to give facilities the opportunity to showcase one-of-a-kind wall features that customize a space.

Because of the wide variety of products available in today's market, it is more challenging than ever to determine the best choice for each wall. To help with this decision, below are three considerations to keep in mind when choosing a wallcovering for a healthcare facility.

## First, Do No Harm: Select a Product Conducive to Healing

Meeting healthcare standards and reducing exposure to infection is the most important part of healthcare interior design. When examining wallcovering products, you should consider all safety and health risks associated with each product.

According to *Estimating Health Care-Associated Infections and Deaths in U.S. Hospitals, 2002*, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1.7 million hospital-acquired infections occur annually nationwide. Infections arise from disease-causing pathogens that survive on frequently touched surfaces for extended

periods of time. To help mitigate the spread of these germs, high-touch surfaces, such as walls found in common areas and patient care areas, should be smooth and fissure free.

When considering health hazards associated with wallcoverings, think about the function of the area. Wall surfaces near sinks or toilets have a higher risk for contamination, and wallcoverings such as tile or a highly scrubbable, antimicrobial paint are the best options to reduce the spread of infection in these areas. Additionally, wallcoverings within high-traffic areas, such as the lobby or reception areas, should not only resist pathogens but also should be fire-treated and fire-resistant. Untreated wallcoverings can pose a greater threat to spreading fires and

potentially block exit pathways.

Of course, it is a given that the wallcovering you select must meet healthcare design regulations. If you are unsure what regulations apply, consult an experienced healthcare designer who is familiar with the regulations that pertain to your state. Failing to do this could be costly – you could be forced to replace thousands of square feet of wallcovering.

## Keep Maintenance Low

As an essential part of a facility's annual budget, repair and maintenance expenses should be considered when selecting wallcoverings. Choosing durable products that are easy to clean will ease maintenance efforts and facility care expenses.

Before reviewing wallcovering options with a designer, you should know the budget and be prepared to analyze maintenance costs associated with each option. By collaborating with a designer, you can find a product that

works within the design scheme and requires less upkeep.

## Wallcoverings to Create Visual Interest

As leading healthcare designers continue to mix design elements from both the hospitality and healthcare industries, there is more pressure to create an appealing environment that separates a healthcare facility from its competitors. When selecting a product, think of it as a marketing or branding tool. How will it visually enhance the space? How will it affect visitors' first impressions of the facility? Will this design element help your facility stand out from the competition?

Patients have high expectations for their overall healthcare experience, and it's becoming more common for patients to shop around for the right health facility before undergoing a medical procedure. For this reason, visual impressions are more important than ever.

Facility managers should work with designers to find a wallcovering that creates something unexpected and visually pleasing. Wallcoverings can be used to accent walls and common areas and can help your facility stand out and appeal to a wider audience.

## The End Result

As designers explore new wallcovering options and innovative design elements, facility managers should know how wallcoverings affect the look of their interior and add visual interest to spaces. By working with your designer, you can easily determine what options fit within health standards, reduce maintenance efforts and create the most visually attractive space possible. **FC**

*Rebecca Donner is the founder and principal of Inner Design Studio of Nashville, Tenn., which has designed the interiors of more than 500 healthcare facilities throughout the nation.*



Facilities like the Ephraim McDowell Regional Medical Center use a combination of low-maintenance products – water-based epoxy paint and Marlite – to cover the lobby, elevator and reception wall surfaces. Marlite uses a grid system of wood veneered panels that are attached to a subwall with a clip application. Both wallcoverings keep maintenance costs low, as paint requires minimal maintenance and the Marlite clip application allows panels to easily be removed for cleaning and repair. Additionally, by using a product that is not directly adhered to the wall, you have the flexibility to switch out panels for future design renovations.

Wallcoverings similar to those in The Sarah Cannon Cancer Research Institute (SCRI), an oncology clinical trial and drug development center, pique visual interest and are part of the institute's marketing effort to bring in more patients and the pharmaceutical industry. For SCRI, it was important to use a lobby wallcovering that gives guests confidence in their treatment options, while also impressing pharmaceutical representatives. For high visual impact, the lobby, corridor and infusion room walls are covered with stacked maple and Russian birch core veneer plywood. The unique wallcovering creates a warm, relaxing environment and emphasizes SCRI as a leader in cancer research.



Wallcoverings can also be used to interpret exterior design elements. For example, wavy Modular Arts dimensional panels were used throughout the lobby and corridor walls of the Loma Linda University Medical Center to mimic water. This wallcovering served two purposes: it reduced health hazards associated with using an actual waterscape and created a seamless wall of sculptured art.