The famous slogan from the 1992 presidential campaign, “It’s the Economy, Stupid,” was intended to keep the campaign focused on what they believed was the main issue of the campaign. If the healthcare real estate industry were to adopt a similar slogan, it would be, “It’s the Patient, Stupid!” Although a seemingly obvious focus, healthcare real estate has not always followed that charge. Oftentimes the focus was on the hospital system, the physicians, or the return on the development investment; however today, everything begins and ends with the patient. From street signage to the number of HVAC zones, in an increasingly competitive healthcare market, the successful providers of healthcare real estate understand how the bricks-and-mortar affect the patient experience.

As a more patient-centric focus has evolved in the last several years, our clients have stressed the importance of providing the patient with a positive, comfortable experience by making real estate decisions that anticipate elderly or sick patients’ needs and ultimately reduce their anxiety. This increased focus on patient experience requires real estate advisors to view the facility through the eyes of each unique patient.

Based on the type of medical practice, our team at HSA PrimeCare identifies the probable conditions of a patient in order to anticipate issues that could diminish the patient experience. Waiting areas must be clean, comfortable, and spacious to serve patients who are often sick, injured, handicapped, and/or elderly. For pediatric care the waiting area should accommodate a play area so children are happily distracted while they wait for their appointments. In exam rooms, patients are often only wearing thin paper gowns, so installing windows at shoulder height with a perimeter reheat provides both light and privacy while maintaining a comfortable temperature.

Patient comfort is particularly important when dealing with serious illnesses. In developing Franciscan Saint Anthony Health’s Woodland Cancer Care Center in Michigan City, the chemotherapy infusion bays included both private and group bays with comfortable recliners and televisions lined against curtained windows with beautifully landscaped views. This design created a relaxed environment for patients, in which they could choose privacy or a social experience, conversing and networking with others.

At the University of Chicago Medicine Comprehensive Cancer Center at Silver Cross...
Hospital, the linear accelerator needed to be contained in a concrete vault to protect staff and patients from radiation, but the hospital didn’t want the patients to feel like they were walking into a dark, enclosed vault. The HSA PrimeCare design team was able to create a shallow corridor from the entrance to the machine, which allowed for a thinner, less intimidating door. We then carefully selected artwork to hang along the corridor that would offer some comfort to the patients.

Another change in recent years has been the selection of buildings or development locations that are easily accessible and geographically convenient to the patient. Some medical groups are choosing retail locations with high visibility, easy access, and abundant parking offering the convenience of seeing the doctor at a familiar location. Alternatively, others prefer to be in larger, multi-specialty medical office buildings or campuses that provide the convenience of multi-specialty care. With this strategy, a patient can potentially see their primary care physician in the same location as their podiatrist or cardiologist. Staying on campus to get diagnostic services such as a doctor-ordered MRI, CT scan, blood test, or even to have surgery at an attached surgery center, can also be convenient.

Recently, an ophthalmology group chose to locate its practice at HSA PrimeCare’s MOB on the Advocate Medical Campus Southwest in Tinley Park. The campus includes the multi-specialty MOB and the attached Tinley Woods Surgery Center. Beyond the obvious convenience for the physician who is able to see patients and do surgery on the same campus, this set-up ultimately improves the patient experience by eliminating anxieties associated with finding a new, unfamiliar location on the day of surgery.

We could build the best medical building with all the bells and whistles in the best location, but without a professional healthcare property management team that understands the unique relationship between the hospital, physician, and patient, no medical group could succeed in the space. The management team is the most important factor in providing a building that promotes a safe and healthy environment. The team providing day to day services to a medical building must be intimately aware of the special services required in serving both the patient and the physician tenant. Things like not just having automated entrance doors, but having the doors timed so that they stay open long enough for patients using walkers, or providing a greeter to help patients more easily find their way are precautions that are not typical in building management, but in healthcare they are what ultimately make a medical office building successful.

At the end of the day, everyone must remember the charge: “It’s the Patient, Stupid!”