



# BETTER CARE BY DESIGN

How one healthcare system partnered with Medline to co-create a new kind of patient gown

No one likes the traditional hospital gown, and Daniela Cherry has gotten all of the usual complaints on patient satisfaction surveys.

"We kept reading about how our patients felt their privacy was being invaded," says Cherry, Senior Solutions Manager at Intermountain Healthcare, a 22-hospital system based in Salt Lake City.

By 2014, she'd heard enough complaints about the gaping-here and ill-fitting-there gowns to do something about them. She thought it should be simple to improve both the perception and the reality of one of the most upfront elements of hospital care. All she had to do was buy a better gown. After 40 years with the then-current style, it was about time.

So she and her team started by assembling a list of 360 must-have, should-have and wish-to-have requirements and whittled it down to 24 attributes.

"Patient privacy, comfort and ease of accessibility were first on our list," she says.



A new kind of patient gown allows for patient privacy, comfort and ease of accessibility.



The new gowns should also be more durable and hold up longer to laundering. And they should be more aesthetically pleasing than the traditional wrinkly, color-faded garments.

With the list of attributes completed, Cherry started placing calls to supplies nationwide. How hard could it be?

**The partnership**

It turned out that finding such a gown wasn't difficult — it was impossible. It didn't exist.

"With even the highest-quality gowns on the market, we were able to find maybe 60 percent of what we were looking for," she says.

There was only one way to get what they really wanted — they'd have to design it themselves.

To do that, they turned to Medline in what Cherry calls a first-of-its-kind partnership in hospital-wear branding. Intermountain had been a Medline customer for some time and she was confident that the two organizations could work well together. Dan Sanchez, Vice President of Textile Sales at Medline, agreed.

"We were asked to co-invent and co-patent a gown," Sanchez says. "It sounded like a great challenge to us

and we were thrilled to be involved."

Medline brought to the challenge the ideal material for the job.

"They already had the perfect fade- and wrinkle-resistant fabric, which would make the gown look better and stay better looking for longer," says Cherry.

The Medline material was also softer than the typical gown and it was breathable, allowing it to wick moisture away from the skin rather than absorbing it, providing greater comfort. It was a great starting point, but so much more needed to be done.

**Design phase**

The goal was to come up with a universal design, even though hospitals typically have multiple types of patient gowns, depending on the reason for hospitalization and the type of care required. A maternity gown, for instance, functions differently than one for patients who are bedridden and must receive IV fluids.

That desire to consolidate designs by creating one gown with multiple functionality features resulted in the name of the product — the Universal Patient Gown.

Cherry spent about 18 months addressing every concern and working to figure out how one style could work for all purposes. One leading challenge was making the universal gown reversible so patients could wear it open in the front or back,

For the sake of modesty and dignity, the gowns have more fabric and come with color-coordinated draw ties to keep the access opening cinched in an overlapping, gap-free wrap, elimination exposure when walking the halls.

depending on accessibility needs, and that required a design modification. If a patient took a gown with a V-neck front and wore it the other way, it would be as irritating as wearing a shirt backward.

"So I said, 'Why not have dual V-necks so it would feel just as comfortable however you wore it?'" says Cherry.

For the sake of modesty and dignity, the gowns have more fabric and come with color-coordinated draw ties to keep the access opening cinched in an overlapping, gap-free wrap, elimination exposure when walking the halls. Furthermore, snap sleeves give the gown a more tapered look while making the arms easily accessible for drips or needles. Snaps are also located at the neckline to adjust for size and for additional modesty.

And in a nod to hospital staff, gowns and ties are color-coded by size for easy storage and quick retrieval.

"It was a very collaborative experience," says Cherry of her working relationship with Sanchez and his team at Medline. "When we felt we had it solved, we made about a thousand prototypes for trial."



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# STUDY: Perceptions of new hospital gowns

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to better understand staff's and patients' perceptions of new hospital gowns, including:

1. How comfortable the new gowns are for patients
2. How well the new gowns preserve the dignity and modesty of patients
3. How easy it is for staff to continue to perform clinical functions with the new gown

## METHODS

Interviews with 20 patients and 22 staff were conducted between April 2016 and June 2016. Interviews took place at the following hospital units.

- Dixie Regional Medical Center: Cardiovascular, Orthopedics
- Intermountain Medical Center: Maternity, Surgical Transplant, Medical Oncology, Neuro Rehab

## KEY FINDINGS

1. Both staff and patients had a generally positive outlook on the new hospital gowns, with many reporting that the new gowns are better than the previous gowns (60 percent and 70 percent, respectively).
2. Most patients (85 percent) rated the comfort and sizing of the new gown as "very good" or "excellent."
3. Most patients (80 percent) rated the coverage and privacy offered by the new gown as "very good" or "excellent."
4. Almost all staff rated their ability to work around the new gowns as "about the same" (59 percent) or "better" (32 percent) compared to previous gowns.
5. Both staff and patients felt the addition of snaps offered more privacy and increased comfort for patients while still allowing staff the access necessary to take vitals and work around the gown.



# Top five patient gown must-haves

Designing a patient gown takes careful thought and consideration. And while there are lots of great ideas for making the finest garment possible, there are five qualities every design must have.

- 1. Coverage.** Modesty is important, and patients want to be as well covered as possible. Good design should include modest cuts with full coverage for enhanced patient dignity.
- 2. Comfort.** Gowns should be created with attention to detail and a special focus on how the fabric, cut and functionality work together for the best comfort and fit.
- 3. Durability.** Material must be able to hold up against frequent wear and repeated washing, and neck and waist ties should be made of durable 100 percent polyester twill and reinforced to the body of the gown for added strength.
- 4. Design.** Patients prefer stylish gowns with fresh, modern prints and contemporary flair — a gown with a little personality can contribute to positive patient experience.
- 5. Extra features.** Gowns with substantial telemetry pockets, easy snaps, generous sweeps in a variety of materials, V-neck design for added mobility and nursing gowns with modesty inserts add to functionality, style and comfort.



That was the highlight for Cherry. She finally had gowns to hand out to friends, family and co-workers for feedback.

“Some even wore them to work and said they were as comfortable as anything else they’d wear,” she says.

## 200 washes

Her team deliberately beat up the new gowns by washing them. A lot.

“We found that after 200 washings, they’d retained their vibrant color and looked indistinguishable from the never-washed gowns,” Cherry says.

That’s huge from a hospital’s budgetary standpoint, as the typical

gown only stands up to about 30 washings before it is thrown away. Cherry says she doesn’t yet know how many trips to the laundry the new gowns will withstand because they haven’t yet failed.

## To market

As of July 1, the new patent-pending Universal Patient Gown is in use in 60 percent of the hospitals in the Intermountain system, and the fade-, shrink- and wrinkle-resistant design is winning over budget- and logistics-minded staffers.

“The durability means they don’t have to be replaced nearly as often, and with the one design, we don’t

have to buy four different kinds of gowns,” Cherry says. “That means we’ve been able to reduce inventory and storage costs.”

And even more important, patients are becoming fans.

“The new gowns have been very well received, and we’re seeing improvements in HCAHPS scores,” says Tammy Richards, Patient Clinical Engagement Director.

Intermountain plans to continue to expand the product line throughout its system and eventually market to other hospital organizations.

And maybe someday, there will be no more complaints about hospital gowns. ■



## WHY YOU NEED TO BUILD **BRAND POWER**

By Sue MacInnes

As healthcare systems expand their reach through mergers and acquisitions and tackle new payment methodologies such as mandatory bundled payments and ACO arrangements, they are investing resources in rebranding their organizations and integrating the new brand promise in everything they do.

Medical supplies may seem like an unlikely avenue to build brand awareness. However, when you think of the touch points — every nurse/patient, staff and family interaction — and compare that to investments in advertising, media and PR, what better way to reach patients through every aspect of their care than through branding? With branding, whether it's a physician office, surgery center, home health or elsewhere throughout the healthcare system, your hospital system can be everywhere.

### **Marketing to the trends**

Across the country we are seeing an expansion of integrated networks. Healthcare systems are venturing into post-acute spaces, rapidly expanding their owned physician practices



## FEATURE



Take a look at this photo from NYC Health + Hospitals. Can you spot all the branded clothing on the baby?

This campaign recognizes not only the first babies of 2016 across the entire system, but offers a showcase of successful systemwide branding in the midst of celebrating new life.



and positioning themselves to capture the consumer by building loyalty, awareness and, ultimately, consumer preference.

With the advent of healthcare reform and increased cost pressures, the rise of consumerism is a reality new to healthcare providers. Consumerism is not an area of expertise, but consumers are making value-based decisions on where they want care, who they want it from, how much they want to spend and what they expect to get for their money.

Because of this, healthcare systems are making big investments in patient experience and marketing both internally and externally.

As systems expand their networks and merge with other providers, names, logos and signage change, and in many cases, the entire hospital brand may change to better connect with a patient or family. Large sums of money are invested in ad campaigns, including billboards, TV commercials and radio spots. And healthcare systems are contracting

with big-name ad and branding agencies to appeal to consumers and compete in their changing markets.

The most powerful branding campaigns occur when the organization is all in, from the CEO down. Unless the CEO is driving this initiative, relaying the message of the system's mission and vision, explaining who they are and will be and supporting the marketing team 100 percent, the campaign will be nothing more than new art. However, if there is real commitment driven by leadership and supported by everyone in the system, that branding campaign can be

the most important single investment the health system has ever made.

### Patient experience drives branding

Achieving meaningful innovation and brand awareness requires a deep understanding of the people at the heart of your design. So while you focus on patients in the context of their environment, also direct observations to the larger realm of your culture: its clinicians, care partners and external stimuli that actively influence a patient's lifestyle. Through these insights — coupled with industry knowledge and healthcare expertise — you can discover opportunities for innovation that will impact change. The brand can be powerful through design, but more important, your brand represents and emotes what your healthcare organization stands for.

Today, there is a shift from branding that looks highly medical to



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branding that is personal, resonating, promotes wellness and healthy lifestyles and is collaborative and clever. Part of this shift is the result of the Affordable Care Act; the other part is consumer choice and competition.

If current trends are any indication, consumer expectations will continue to change. Consumers will be more involved in and responsible for their healthcare, and they will expect healthcare that is meaningful, inspiring, caring and kind.

People buy with emotion. If healthcare is becoming a consumer-driven market, we need to connect to our customers as consumers, doing deep dives into their needs and developing our brand to support and represent the people at the heart of the design and the ever-changing outside influences.

### **Brand new to brand power?**

Talk to hospital systems that have recently gone through branding changes, not to copy them but to learn from them. Read about consumer branding and marketing. Use people outside of marketing as judges of your ideas. Have patient councils. Include nursing and clinical staff as influences/advisors, but also include forward thinkers, strategists and dreamers.

Don't be afraid of the money it will cost to change your brand. Get branding agency references and think big. Healthcare is changing, and our patients are changing with it. I have been lucky to be intimately involved with branding many systems, and have seen big differences. If your system is serious, it is a big job. But the ROI is incredible and worth the investment. ■



## WHAT ROLES DO TEXTILES PLAY IN BRANDING A FACILITY?

In the past, textile branding involved Kaumographing the hospital's name on items such as sheets, blankets, pillow cases and patient gowns. The Kaumograph was one of the original ways to brand hospital textiles.

Textiles have such an opportunity to extend a brand. A patient's comfort can be tremendously affected by the fabrics that touch them, as well as by the sense of dignity and privacy represented by redesigned patient gowns.

Another opportunity is packaging items to help patients transition from the hospital to home, offering sheets for hospital beds, underpads, robes and other items to ease anxiety and confusion.

Or, think about mothers and new babies. The baby is an extension of a family the health system hopes to keep for life. Uniquely branded and packaged baby items for the mom to take home will extend the brand past the initial birthing at the hospital to the meet and greet in the community. And that first baby picture in the hospital? Branded items in a picture send a message for life. One customer told me that because of the unique design of the baby items in their health system, she could recognize one of their babies in any city. Now that is a branding campaign.