

Healing the patient's environment

The Architectural Therapy Clinic shows us that revamping your home can also revamp your health

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Doctors are obviously the first choice when it comes to healing those who get sick. But it is not in every case that medical treatment cures. The Architectural Therapy Clinic project was initiated under this concern -- with the belief that the better the environment, the higher the chance of a patient's recovery.

"Doctors can also give them suggestions on revamping their home. But, it's not clear enough for them to know exactly what to do," says Thira Woratanarat, director of the Research and Development Office for Health Research Translation at the Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, who initiated the project. "Through realising that there are people who are experts on this issue, we decided to invite architects to work with us in order to improve the patient's health."

The Architectural Therapy Clinic sees joint co-operation between the JARKEN Group of Companies, the Research and Development Office for Health Research Translation of the Faculty of Medicine at Chulalongkorn University and the Orthopaedic Unit of the Faculty of Medicine of Ramathibodi Hospital, Mahidol University. The clinic is located at Ramathibodi Hospital's Department of Orthopaedics and is open every Friday morning.

The Bangkok-based JARKEN is an international award-winning interior and architecture design firm. Through this project, JARKEN received the prestigious Asia Responsible Entrepreneurship Award 2014 for the company's health promotion initiative. The award was presented by the regional non-governmental organisation, Enterprise Asia, at a ceremony in Singapore.

The project's main target groups are patients who are recovering from chronic diseases or who have a terminal illness, elders with no health problems and dependent elders. Apart from this, Thira said the project could also extend to support allergic patients by designing a living space with good ventilation or designing more natural surroundings for depressed patients to help reduce their symptoms.

The project's process is simple and free of charge. It starts after the patients finish their medical care consultation with their doctors. The Architectural Therapy Clinic then comes into the picture by welcoming any

patient who would like to seek advice for making improvements to their house.

"People always think that fixing a house is a big thing that costs a lot of money, but there is advice available from professionals who can offer many options to suit the patient's pocket," said Thira.

The improvements made in the houses could be minor changes from placing slip resistant tape on the floor, or installing the correct type of grab rails, to major ones like a house extension.



Cholatit Thanadsilapakul, the architect principal from JARKEN Group, said that architecture therapy doesn't only focus on the patients but also the caregivers.

"Having a patient in the house is already tough. If the environment isn't suitable, it could be tougher. On the other hand, if the environment is in good shape, it can create a nice atmosphere for the whole family."

At Ramathibodi Hospital, some patients get regular home visits for health advice by the hospital's medical staff. Since this project started, the architects have joined the team in providing suggestions on how to heal their living surroundings and environment.

"When we visit their houses, we can see how each patient lives their life. For instance, what area they spend most of their time in and what their daily routine is. Once we understand the patient's habits we could give them a case-by-case suggestion," explained Cholatit. "We try to suggest something that they could do by themselves or if they do need to hire someone, it needs to be at low cost and bring the least amount of disturbance to their daily life."

However, if the family is willing to make major improvements to the house for the patient's sake, the team is also willing to give them all the necessary advice and consultation.

One of the biggest cases that the team has handled is the case of an elderly lady who had a stroke and became half-paralysed. She lived on the second floor of a house which was uncomfortable and inconvenient as she had to visit the doctor quite often. We saw that the patient's children lived in a detached house where it was possible to put in an extension so that the lady could live with them. That's when the team offered to help design the extended area.

"We even considered what the lady could see from her bed," explained Cholatit. "So, on one side of the extended area is a garden and the other is linked to the house where she can see the daily activities of her family. The bed position is also in the middle of the room -- easy for the nurse to move her around in case of emergency, and there is also a ramp to the room."

Cholatit said that unlike any other architectural project where the look becomes one of the most important factors, in this case the design focuses on the patient and functions specifically for that person.

"Feedback from patients and relatives is the success indicator of the project; if they find their lives easier after following our suggestions, then that's the success," said Cholatit.

It's been almost a year since the project started running. One big problem is that some families don't have adequate amounts of money to spend on this. Thus, the project also raises funds under the Ramathibodi Foundation to support those who are in need.

According to Cholatit, the biggest challenge is how to convince patients and their families that the suggestions made will be beneficial.

"The results may not immediately show but once the patient gets used to their new atmosphere, it ends up helping them to have a better and easier lifestyle."

Apart from helping patients, he also hopes that the project will show many that a career in architecture can help improve the quality of lives of sick people.

To the project initiator, Thira, another indicator of the campaign's success has been the exchange of knowledge that the partners have made. "If architects would adapt these experiences in building houses to their customers and if medical staff could give patients suggestions on how to improve dwellings on their own, the chances of people having better health and a better quality of life will be much higher in the long run."

10 important elements to consider when building houses for patients.



1. Brightness.

- The brightness is adequate for reading.
- The brightness is adequate to clearly see what's on the floor.
- The brightness is adequate for moving the body without bumping things.



2. Flooring.

- Not slippery.
- The whole floor should be at the same level.
- An obvious sign must be noticeable in cases where the floor level does change.



3. Ceiling materials.

- Thermal insulation must be installed.
- Bright colours must be used.
- The height of the ceiling must be suitable and give off a comfortable feeling.

6. Stairs.

- The step of a ladder should not exceed 17cm.
- The width of each step must be wide enough for the whole foot.
- Non-slippery materials must be used and a noticeable sign on each step should be displayed.



7. Ventilation.

- The room should be spacious and have no unpleasant smells.
- The environment must not be stuffy, even without an air-conditioner.
- The numbers of windows should conform to the room's size or there should be at least two windows in opposite positions.



8. Assistant equipment.

- Install grab-rails in the toilet especially near the toilet bowl and shower.
- Place slip resistant tape in the bathroom, especially near the shower.
- The width of the walkway should be wide enough to fit a walker or wheelchair (at least 1m).