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Hospitals rethink spiritual spaces, create meditation rooms

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They have space for prayer rugs and windows facing east – but no pews or religious symbols. They are called meditation rooms, sanctuaries where families can pray for patients, and doctors can pause for spiritual refreshing.

At least three area hospitals have plans to open meditation rooms – or expand and revise what were once known as chapels – for nondenominational observance. Reasons range from the changing needs of hospital staff, with more Muslims seeking a place to follow daily rituals, to the evolving view of medicine that the body and soul can heal together.

"When people are facing the ultimate spiritual and existential crisis such as illness, they need a quiet place to go," said Chaplain Connie Johnstone, manager of spiritual care for Kaiser North Valley hospitals.

Some hospitals don't call the rooms chapels because that label invokes the Judeo-Christian tradition, she said. Hospitals have staff from a wide variety of faith backgrounds, she added, including many Muslims who need a place to pray five times a day.

"These rooms should meet the needs of all faiths," Johnstone said.

Kaiser Permanente, for the first time in the Sacramento area, is constructing four meditation rooms in three hospitals. The first, at Kaiser Medical Center on Morse Avenue, opens in two weeks. UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento will open a large interfaith space in its new pavilion wing, scheduled to open in the fall. Sutter Health's new hospital for women and children in Sacramento will open in 2013 with a 40-seat meditation room.

"Muslim prayer rugs and Jewish prayer shawls will be available," said Lisa Nordlander, director of spiritual care services at Sutter Medical Center in Sacramento. She said the current room is outdated. "The new room will be more inclusive. We'll also have banners from different faith traditions."

Hospital officials say they are opening and expanding meditation rooms in response to a demand by visitors and staff, as well as growing awareness of the role spirituality plays in healing.

"More than ever we are looking at treating the entire person," said Samuel Brown-Dawson, coordinator of clinical pastoral services at UC Davis Medical Center. "People of all faiths – and people of non-faith – need a place where they can sit down and reflect, many as they are trying to make a decision," he said.

Calling them meditation rooms is much more common on the West Coast, say experts. "In the Midwest and the East Coast, they're still called chapels," said Wendy Cadge, a Brandeis University associate professor of sociology who has written about the trend.

Instead of having traditional religious symbols, such as a cross and an altar, many meditation rooms have nature motifs. "Some of them look like art galleries," she said.

At Kaiser on Morse Avenue, interfaith religious leaders offered input on the design of the space. Once a labor and delivery room, it will seat 14. Stained glass – with an image of a bridge symbolizing healing – decorates the wall. A bowl in which worshippers can place written prayers sits on a shelf. Instead of a traditional altar, there is space for meditation mats and prayer rugs.

"We saw these rooms as a chance to put into action one of the key values Kaiser holds – diversity," said Johnstone.

Other public spaces are now installing meditation rooms, said Cadge. They can be found in prisons, universities and airports. Sacramento International Airport opened a "quiet room" in Terminal A that is managed by the Interfaith Service Bureau.

"It's a quiet place where passengers who are anxious about flying can go," said airport spokeswoman Gina Swankie.

But most meditation rooms can be found in hospitals. "Our whole philosophy is to support the mind, body and spirit," said Johnstone said. "This is an integral part of that."

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