
A new ICU equipment diagram...but is it Art?



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Design for Southmead ICU

It is well established that the Arts have a clear contribution to make in the delivery of an improved healthcare experience for patients, service users and staff. 'Arts and health are, and should be firmly recognised as being, integral to health, healthcare provision and healthcare environments, including supporting staff.' (Department of Health Working Group on Arts and Health 2006)

Southmead Hospital (part of North Bristol NHS Trust) has a very active arts programme – Fresh Arts, who have introduced a range of creative interventions including sculpture, music, exhibitions and craft activities, which all help make the hospital a welcoming and stimulating place.

Our recent work for the ICU at Southmead hospital is decorative and visual engaging, but it's not Art (with the all important capital 'A'). This is not false modesty, but rather our desire to extol the virtues of our work as the product of graphic design rather than Art. The difference can appear nuanced, but broadly speaking Art and graphic design come from different starting points. Graphic design has a more purpose driven approach - understanding problems and using type and image to provide solutions. A process of visual communication which joins function with aesthetics.

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The challenge

The ICU team at Southmead identified a number of challenges, many common to large modern hospitals, from impersonal spaces and long anonymous corridors, to the (very necessary but complicated) way-finding system that can leave visitors, and even staff, disorientated. Other issues included the 'visual noise' from the many styles of posters, instructions and signs, and a department that was rather visually impersonal and lacking a sense of it's own identity.

The solution

Our proposal was to create a comprehensive visual identity that would solve some of these issues in a 'holistic' way. In conversation with the ICU team we identified several areas for 'intervention' including signage, information leaflets and wall art. We developed a visual palette, including colours and a clear and engaging style of illustration, that would give the work a consistent feel. These elements were used to design signage, leaflets and diagrams, that together give the department it's own visual identity. The goal was to create an environment that would improve visitor experience and help reduce stress levels.

Our watch-words for every aspect of the project were to welcome, orientate, inform and engage. Solutions ranged from a welcoming wall graphic to colour-coded panels at the entrance to each Pod that help visitors to navigate the space. These panels also consolidate the varied instructions - giving a more 'distilled' version of the information. Similarly a decorative panel and simple leaflet in the waiting room now offer a welcoming and easily accessible guide to the most frequently requested visitor information.

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Example: ICU equipment diagram

Our approach is best exemplified in our ICU equipment diagram. For those unfamiliar with the critical care environment the machines and technology can be threatening or overwhelming and can intensify what is already a stressful situation. Working with consultant Stephen Robinson and Clinical Matron Julie Izzard, we designed a visual aid that would give families and visitors a better understanding of the equipment around a patient. This infographic uses simple, iconic illustrations and descriptions of machine function in straightforward inclusive language – to present the information in a way that is clear and easily understandable.

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Our approach is similar to that used in Harry Beck's iconic London tube map, prioritising clarity and comprehensibility over accuracy. Simple but not childish or patronising. The visual appeal was an important aspect of this work - combining the functional and decorative. The diagram was printed onto large format vinyl (approx 2x4m) and now gives the corridor a stronger identity and provides helpful reference point to orientate oneself in this large space.

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Conclusion

Our ICU diagram, in particular has found resonance with those working in critical care environments around the country. It's a deceptively simple piece of work, but the virtues of clarity and simplicity are often the hallmark of a successful design. So as we applaud a growing appreciation of the role of Art in healthcare, we like to commend the particular approach graphic design brings – the positive benefits of clear information and a well designed visual environment for patients, visitors and staff alike.

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