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Medical Offices Designed for This Century

By CLAIRE WILSON

THE new headquarters of the [Westchester](#) Medical Group in Rye, N.Y., is a lot like a high-tech yacht. It is compact and streamlined, and every function and tool has a clearly defined place. Space is used as economically as possible, and what isn't absolutely necessary has been eliminated — even paper files and X-rays, which are now fully computerized. When possible, e-mail messages are substituted for intraoffice phone calls to cut down on distracting nonurgent communication and noise.

According to Andrew Fredman, the [Manhattan](#) architect who designed the space, suites of offices and examination rooms are arranged by medical specialty and are situated near related services. Radiology is close to orthopedics and urgent care, for example, and ultrasound is near the obstetrics/gynecology department. All test results are now transmitted via e-mail.

“The design is predicated on the notion that doctors are best at doing their medical work,” said Mr. Fredman, who operates Andrew Fredman Architects, based in Manhattan. “It is a well-run machine.”

The headquarters of the Westchester Medical Group — opening officially on June 14 — has about 60,000 square feet of space in a two-story building that was renovated at a cost of about \$6 million. The building is on a grassy knoll a few minutes' drive from the Rye town center, about a half-hour by train from Midtown Manhattan. It had most recently been the corporate offices of Lillian Vernon, the catalog retailer.

The building was vacant for nearly two years before a consortium of investors, including some doctors from the Westchester Medical Group, bought the property, according to Dr. Simeon A. Schwartz, the group president, and Dr. Barney Newman, the medical director.

The space was gutted and designed to accommodate patients and medical staff from six offices around the county that are being consolidated at the new location. Six other offices of the Westchester Medical Group remain in the area, including an 87,000-square-foot site in White Plains. The Rye building will have more than 50 doctors and 100 other employees when the consolidation is completed over the next few months.

Patients enter the building through a two-story, sun-washed post-modern-style atrium that is lined with alternating strips of light and dark cherry paneling. A staircase with black handrails sweeps up at the center of the structure, which is shaped like a scalene triangle, with each side a different length.

The building's lack of right angles could have posed a design problem, but proved to be an advantage to the architect, who divided the space into almost 200 rooms, some of them smaller than 100 square feet. The total also includes 50 bathrooms.

"The geometry and few right angles allowed me to create different, unique spaces," said Mr. Fredman, whose firm has done commercial and residential work, including the conversion of a building once used by a [Brooklyn](#) police precinct into residential housing.

Each of the four hallways that extends from the central staircase has the look of a Main Street, with portals that look like storefronts in two shades of cherry wood. Earth tones dominate the décor, which includes seven types of carpet tiles, black granite countertops on cherry-wood reception desks and patterned armchairs for each waiting room.

The pediatric suite has low-maintenance, specially coated wood floors instead of carpet in a child-oriented waiting area; bright aqua and white tiles are placed in a hopscotch pattern in the area where exams take place.

Each specialty area — from primary care to radiology to outpatient oncology treatment — has its own shoplike portal with a separate waiting area, behind which are the examination rooms.

An urgent-care center that can treat 50 patients a day will also open, along with a conference room in one corner of the main floor that will be used for teaching and lectures as well as staff meetings. Also incorporated into the layout are an optician shop, adjacent to the eye-care suite on the second floor, and a branch of a local drugstore, the Rye Beach Pharmacy, which will open on the main floor.

The design strategy is built around the patient care areas. Each of these is a warren of small rooms and hallways; doctors' consulting rooms are paired with examination rooms. Each cluster has its own bathroom. A medical assistant sits at a station in the corridor within view and earshot of each room in the pod.

The computerization of the facility allows it to be so compact. All patient information is on electronic files, to which only doctors and auxiliary medical personnel have access. Those files come up as soon as the patient checks in, which is accomplished by swiping a credit card at a terminal at the reception area.

In the treatment rooms, doctors view the charts on mobile computer units called C.O.W.'s, for computers on wheels. Information like blood-pressure readings, which are now taken with computerized equipment, are automatically entered into the chart.

All tests are ordered via e-mail. Prescriptions are issued by computer and sent directly to any pharmacy equipped to fill them that way. X-rays are likewise computerized and, therefore, there is no need for films. Images from sonograms, mammograms or X-rays appear on the computer screen of the radiologist or technician within seconds of being shot, according to Dr. Schwartz.

"You have a written report within 15 minutes," he said.

More time is saved by placing services adjacent to the specialties that require them.

But gone are the huge clusters of file cabinets so ubiquitous in doctors' offices. "The average office visit is about 15 minutes, so if there is no paperwork to do in the exam room, the patient gets the full 15 minutes," Dr. Newman said.

ACCORDING to Dr. Schwartz, the savings on support personnel is also substantial. Where there are generally five employees per doctor in a practice, the Westchester Medical Group as a whole has around three per doctor.

In designing the space, Mr. Fredman wanted to maximize the natural light that floods in from skylights along the top floor. He also chose a traditional look as a foil to the high-tech infrastructure whirring behind the scenes to produce something that is comfortable and nonclinical in feel.

But choosing carpet and chairs were only part of the challenge. "The fun part of the design was to shoe-horn all their needs into the building and make it so attractive," Mr. Fredman said.