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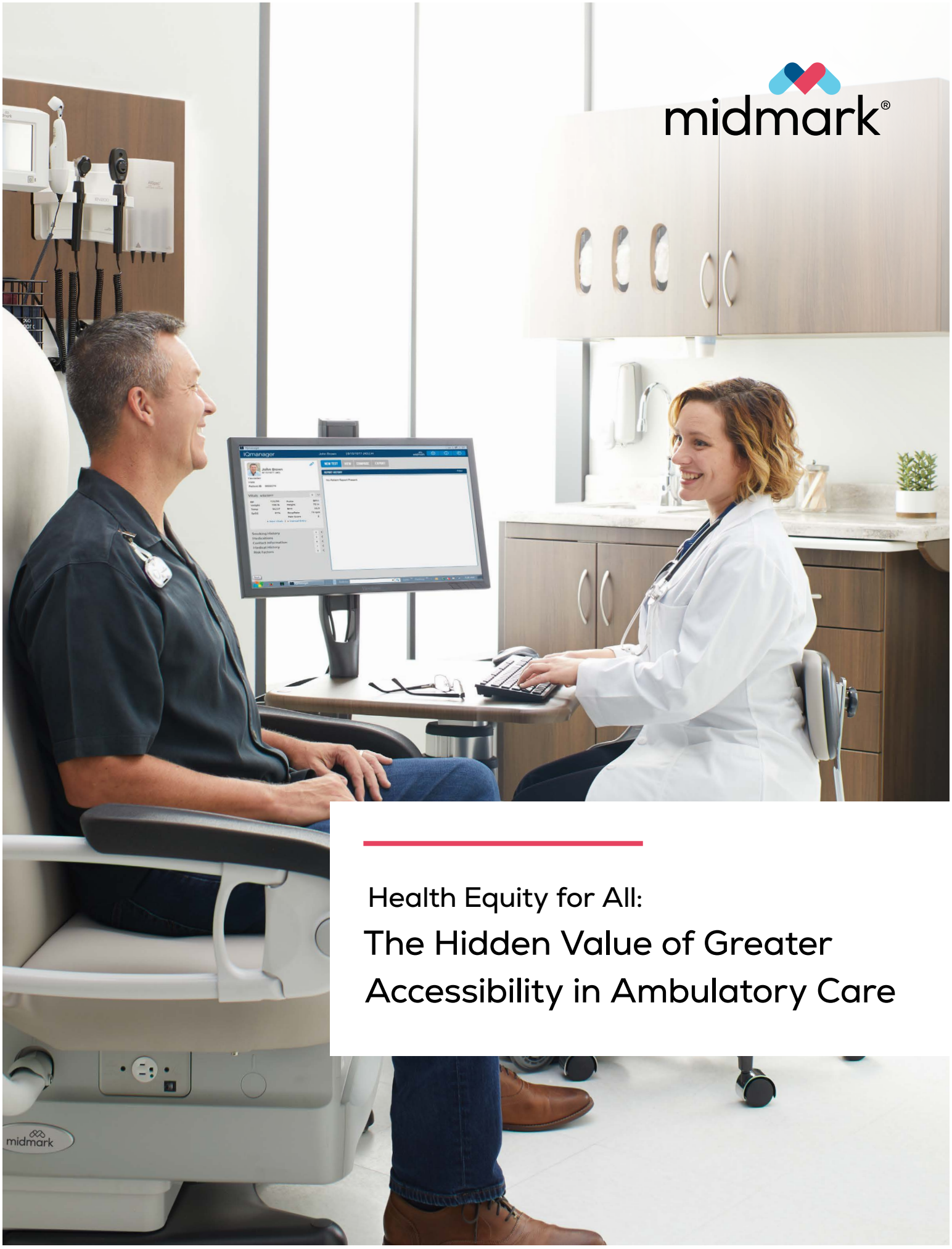


Health Equity for All:

The Hidden Value of Greater Accessibility in Ambulatory Care

Accessibility in ambulatory care environments is crucial for ensuring all patients, regardless of their physical, cognitive or sensory abilities, can access and receive appropriate care. It helps break down barriers and fosters an inclusive environment where every individual, including patients and care teams, can engage in enhancing health and well-being.

This Midmark white paper is designed to help create ambulatory spaces where patients want to visit and caregivers want to work. It looks at the importance of accessibility when it specifically comes to exam and procedure rooms where most of the patient/caregiver interaction occurs. The white paper also takes a closer look at the components of exam and procedure rooms that can help increase accessibility at the point of care.

A Foundation for Long Term Success

The need for greater accessibility in ambulatory care is driven by several factors that reflect both the evolving healthcare landscape and the diverse needs of patient populations and healthcare workers. In a competitive landscape, it can provide an opportunity for a facility or healthcare system to differentiate itself with patients and healthcare workers.

Accessibility is also addressed in one of the pillars of the Quintuple Aim, which is a framework in healthcare that aims to improve the quality and efficiency of care, while addressing health disparities. The five pillars of the Quintuple Aim are:

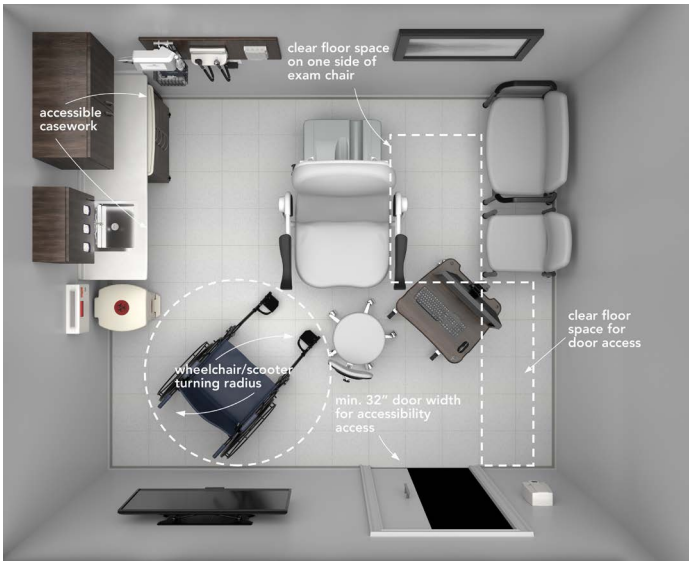
1. Improved patient experience
2. Better outcomes
3. Lower costs
4. Clinician well-being
5. Health equity

The following are important benefits healthcare systems can realize with a committed focus on greater accessibility at the point of care.

Becoming + Remaining Compliant

Since the inception of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), accessibility has become a legal requirement. The ADA prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including healthcare facilities and medical equipment, ensuring everyone has the same rights and opportunities. There are also state regulations concerning spatial relationships in the clinical space that can override Federal ADA regulations.

A provision contained in the Affordable Care Act mandated the US Access Board to develop accessibility standards to ensure medical diagnostic equipment (MDE) used in physician offices, clinics, emergency rooms, hospitals and other medical settings is accessible and usable by individuals with accessibility needs. The statute covers any equipment used by healthcare providers for diagnostic purposes, including examination and procedure chairs.



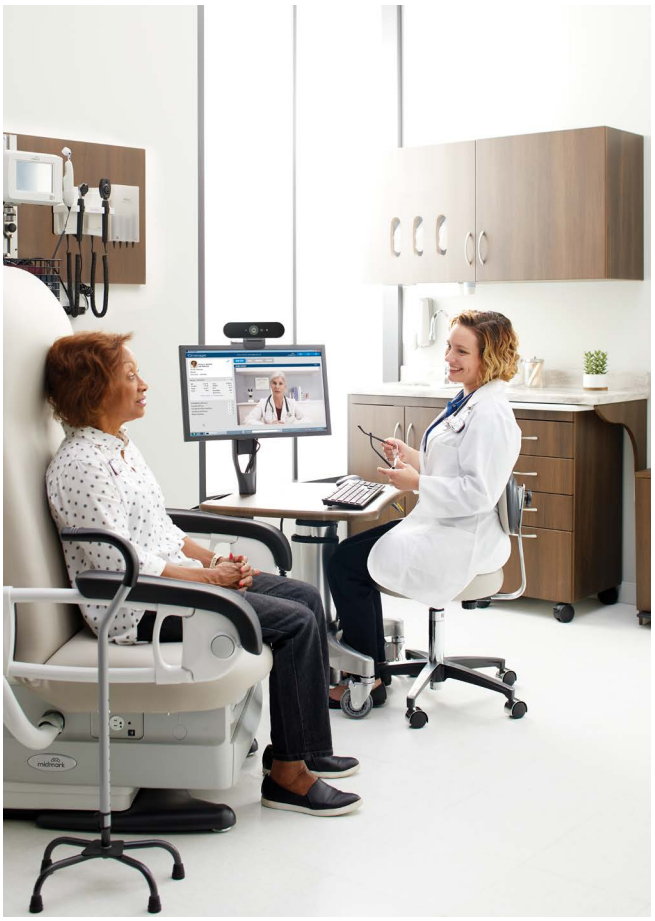
In September 2024, the US Access Board released a new standard providing design criteria for examination and procedure chairs, as well as weight scales and other diagnostic equipment, that are accessible to people with disabilities. In October 2024, the Department of Justice (DOJ) began enforcing the US Access Board standard released in 2017.

The new standard released last year is not currently enforced by the DOJ. However, the DOJ has stated its intention to consider issuing a supplemental rulemaking proposing to adopt the new 17-inch low-seat-height requirement.

Becoming and remaining compliant with accessibility-related standards and regulations can help prevent legal action, fines, reputational damage and loss of funding or accreditation.

Enhancing Safety + Ergonomics

There is growing attention being directed toward the comfort and well-being of healthcare workers. It is becoming widely understood that members of care teams need to be comfortable and feel safe in their environment in order to provide efficient patient care. This is especially important as many healthcare systems deal with labor challenges such as hiring and retaining qualified clinical staff.



Healthcare workers are often the most injured group of workers in the US. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for many caregivers to go home at the end of their shift with back pain, aching necks, and sore muscles and joints. This is often the result of caregivers having to continuously work in uncomfortable positions utilizing poor ergonomics. Not only is this harmful to the caregivers, it can also have a significant impact on the patient/provider interaction, which is at the heart of the point of care experience.

A focus on greater accessibility can play a vital role in enhancing safety and ergonomics in ambulatory care environments, helping to create a more comfortable and efficient environment for healthcare workers. One way to do this is by utilizing equipment that is designed for today's healthcare workers.

This can include adjustable workstations that allow caregivers to maintain proper, ergonomic working positions while interacting with patients, as well as cabinetry that offers caregivers of varying size easy access to supplies without unnecessary bending, stretching or constant overreaching. It can also include examination and procedure chairs that lower to a height that allows patients to transfer to the chair without being lifted by a caregiver—eliminating the potential for serious injury to one or both of the parties involved.

Increasing Workflow Efficiency

Creating a more comfortable and efficient environment for healthcare workers through greater accessibility can directly increase workflow efficiency at the point of care and allow for the most effective use of the healthcare staffs' time. One can look at this in a couple of ways, both of which can be illustrated by the potential need to assist patients with limited mobility onto an examination or procedure chair.

First, there is often the need of more than one healthcare worker when transferring a patient onto an examination or procedure chair that does not lower to an accessible height. The process often takes significant effort and time to properly and safely transfer the patient. This is two members of the care team taking valuable time away from focusing on other tasks or interacting with another patient.

Second is the lost time that might be experienced from potential overexertion or injury among staff who assist with the transfer of patients in this manner. In fact, there are a multitude of injuries healthcare workers can encounter at the point of care, many of which are preventable with a focus on greater accessibility. Along with injuries caused from lifting patients, these can include injuries caused by working in uncomfortable positions with poor posture and continuously straining and bending to reach supplies.

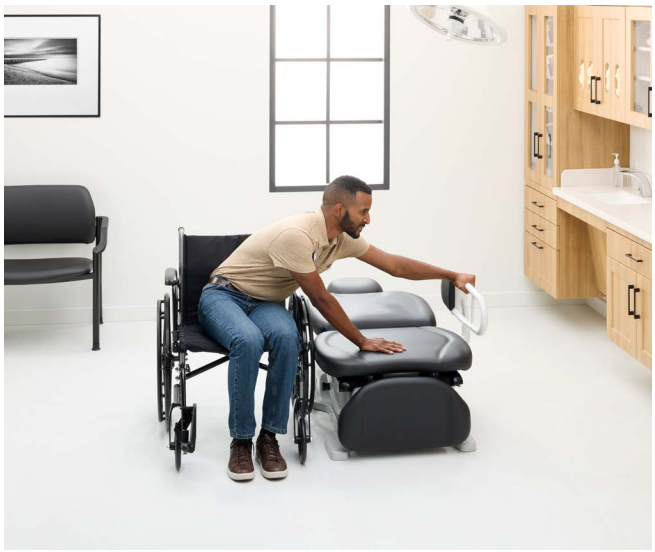
Improving Patient Experience

For a patient population that is becoming older and dealing with more medical conditions, a visit to the doctor's office can be very stressful and receiving adequate care can be challenging due to accessibility issues.

A growing number of healthcare systems are adopting a patient-centered approach to care that emphasizes the importance of understanding the needs, preferences and values of patients. The approach is helping bring a sharper focus on patient comfort and the impact it can have on the quality of care provided, as well as clinical outcomes. The level of comfort for patients can potentially influence their anxiety level and help ease white coat syndrome to avoid possible misdiagnosis of hypertension.

For an example of how greater accessibility can improve patient experience, one can look once again to the transfer of a patient with mobility issues to an examination or procedure chair that does not lower to an accessible height. Having healthcare workers lift the patient onto the chair exposes the patient to the possibility of injury and heightened anxiety levels. It can leave them with an uncomfortable experience.

While an uncomfortable experience can impact the quality of care provided, it can also have a negative impact on the reputation of the facility or healthcare system. Unfavorable comments and ratings can appear on patient satisfaction surveys and foster a perception that the care team is not focused on the patient experience or the quality of care. Greater accessibility can be a key asset in helping ensure favorable patient satisfaction.



Components of Greater Accessibility in Exam + Procedure Rooms

Traditionally, much of the focus around ensuring accessibility to care has been on the entire ambulatory care facility as a whole. Many of these concepts and components are best practices found in facilities across industries. These can include accessible parking, ramps and spacious hallways and waiting areas free of clutter.

However, there is a growing need to ensure accessibility in exam and procedure rooms; especially since these areas are where the majority of the patient-caregiver interaction occurs. The equipment and furniture contained in the rooms, and how they are configured to enhance workflow, can have a big impact on accessibility at the point of care.

A well-designed exam or procedure room accommodates a range of physical, sensory and cognitive needs, creating an environment that is both functional and welcoming for patients and healthcare professionals. The following are how components of exam and procedure rooms can help increase accessibility.

Exam/Procedure Room

The layout and configuration of the exam/procedure room can significantly impact accessibility. The size of the room needs to be large enough to comfortably accommodate the patient, physician and staff, and allow exams and procedures to be properly performed.

The minimum size for an ADA-compliant accessible exam room is approximately 10 foot x 10 foot and provides a 60-inch diameter area to accommodate wheelchair turnaround, as recommended in guidelines of the ADA. These guidelines also recommend providing space between exam/procedure chairs and the walls to allow for safe patient transfers and positioning, and ensuring the entry door to the room has a 32-inch minimum clear opening width with the door open 90 degrees.

Often, the challenge is meeting these guidelines while also ensuring the room is configured with the right equipment and furniture needed to provide accessible, quality care.

Examination/Procedure Chairs

The focus of any exam/procedure room is the examination/procedure chair as it is the place where caregivers truly deliver care to patients—it touches nearly every patient. This is why it is important that an accessible chair be a central fixture of any ambulatory care environment, for patients and healthcare workers.

As mentioned previously, the US Access Board recently released a new standard providing design criteria for exam and procedure chairs. The key ruling states examination and procedure chairs should have a low-seat-height of 17 inches or lower, with a high-seat-height of 25 inches or higher while also providing four additional transfer positions located between the low and high transfer positions.

The seated transfer surface should be at minimum 21 inches wide and 17 inches deep with compliant transfer supports that support entry, exit and repositioning from either side of the chair. The width of the chair base should be no more than 26 inches wide, and where stirrups are provided, leg supports that provide a method of supporting, positioning and securing the patient's legs should also be provided.

These requirements increase the patient's comfort, protect their dignity and help physicians conduct a more thorough and accurate exam or procedure, as well as helping facilitate more informed diagnoses and treatment decisions.

It is worth noting that with the Midmark® 631 Procedure Chair, which reaches a low-seat-height of 17 inches, and the Midmark 626 Barrier-Free® Examination Chair, which reaches a low-seat-height of 15 ½ inches, Midmark is the first and only manufacturer in the market to have both a procedure and examination chair that comply to the 2024 US Access Board standard.

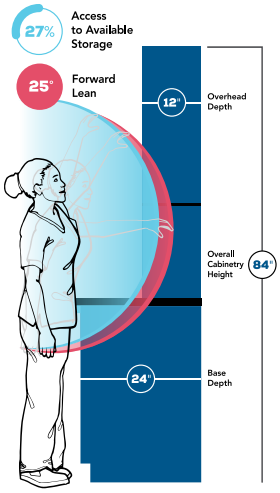
Cabinetry

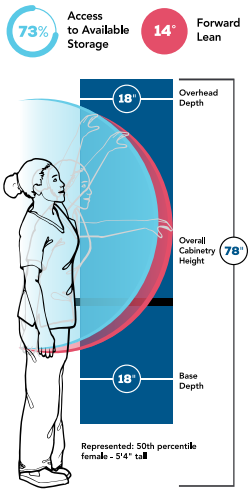
The right cabinetry can help provide greater accessibility for patients and the care team. When designing for the clinical space, the size of room and equipment as well as the types of mobility devices used by patients and staff must be taken into consideration. In cabinetry, accessibility includes front-approach sinks with low countertops, proper under-counter leg-space and appropriate reach to faucet, soap and towels.

For care teams, cabinetry designed specifically for the staff who use it can greatly increase accessibility and help maintain an ergonomically friendly environment.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 76% of healthcare workers are female, while the average height of females in the US is just under 5 feet 4 inches. The typical cabinetry found in clinical environments is not designed for them. Today with traditional 84-inch tall cabinetry, staff often need to use stools or other devices to access supplies on upper shelves.

Cabinetry designed for average-height healthcare workers enables caregivers to easily reach frequently accessed supplies without unnecessary bending, stretching or constant overreaching, which can cause aches and pains. Synthesis® Wall-Hung Cabinetry incorporates ergonomic principles and is designed for the caregivers who interact with cabinetry in the medical space, creating a better caregiver experience at the point of care.





Workstations

Mobile workstations enhance accessibility by enabling caregivers to be more present with patients during visits and supporting seamless patient/caregiver interactions. This helps reduce the communications barrier between patients and caregivers. Caregivers and staff can input information, access patient records or review diagnostic data without leaving the patient's side. This allows them to keep the patient experience and interaction top of mind.

Mobile workstations are height adjustable to ensure a strain-free and comfortable care experience for members of the care team. They allow proper, ergonomically correct working positions so as not to cause unnecessary strain on caregivers' back, shoulders or neck. Fully adjustable arms allow monitors to be easily positioned for both sitting and standing postures. For instance, Midmark® Mobile Workstations are the only mobile workstations ergonomically designed to support the needs of nearly all users, from those with heights in the 5th percentile (5-foot female) to the 95th percentile (6-foot-4-inch male)—and everyone in between.

Fabrics, Colors + Lighting

One area of accessibility often overlooked is the idea of creating sensory-friendly healthcare environments for neurodivergent patients. Neurodivergent individuals, especially those on the autism spectrum, may often experience heightened sensitivities to stimuli. Design elements that can help minimize incidents of sensory overload can include soft dimmable lighting, soft neutral color schemes and soft fabrics and upholstery.

Equipment Providers Can Be a Valuable Resource

Equipment providers can be a valuable resource for helping ensure accessibility is considered during ambulatory care projects. A number of benefits can be realized by engaging with the equipment provider early in the design phase and including them as part of the cross-functional team. This can be especially valuable when the provider has clinical design experience and expertise.

Whether it is a new facility build or a renovation, a knowledgeable equipment provider that has broadened its offerings beyond equipment can bring a deeper understanding of how design, equipment and layout can enhance greater accessibility in the clinical space. These point of care ecosystem experts can provide insight into how the right design, configuration and equipment can increase overall accessibility of the room.

Their in-house design consultation experts can work directly with project architects, contractors and interior designers to help ensure facility design and room configurations align with equipment and furniture needs, and desired workflows and accessibility goals are achieved. They can also help ensure the point of care is compliant with relevant accessibility standards and regulations.

Engaging the equipment provider early in the process provides a valuable opportunity to explore new options and technologies that are available. It can also help eliminate costly instances where necessary changes or different equipment or furniture has to be shoehorned into a project after the design or construction has been completed.

For instance, Midmark provides a variety of benefits to the design process through its Midmark Live Design process. In this setting, the design team often solves potential issues previously undetected and offers options and critical insight to help resolve the issues. Midmark also has a team of EDAC-certified (Evidence Based Design Accreditation and Certification) designers and planners available to offer assistance and expertise from the initial design process through the finished installation and beyond.

Ensuring greater accessibility in a primary care environment is not just about meeting legal obligations but about creating a healthcare system that is fair, inclusive and responsive to the needs of patients. Ensuring accessibility in exam and procedure rooms enhances patient care, improves the healthcare experience, increases efficiencies and ensures individuals, regardless of ability, can access the services they need to live healthy lives.

For more information, visit the point of care design section of the Midmark website.

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