

KAISER PERMANENTE'S TOTAL HEALTH ENVIRONMENT

| Sita Ananth, MHA |

Remember when Kaiser Permanente launched its Thrive campaign on television in 2004. As a long time California resident but somewhat shorter-term Kaiser Permanente member, it struck me that this behemoth of an organization, established by Henry Kaiser in 1945 to care for the workers in his shipyards and steel mills, was now touting in its advertisements that they stood for Pilates, broccoli, dental floss, and treadmills. Long known for its low-cost, dependable care for millions of Californians and others; its nonprofit status; and its commitment to community health, they took a bold stand in saying that health was not an industry but a cause. So what did all this mean to us, the members of Kaiser Permanente? I called my local Kaiser Permanente hospital and asked if I could come to a Pilates class or if there was a treadmill I could use. Unfortunately there wasn't. So what was Thrive and why was it launched?

I posed that question to Patricia Gin, senior brand strategist at Kaiser Permanente, who has worked on the campaign since its inception. She says that Thrive was an external expression of Kaiser Permanente's commitment to "total health," the result of several years of in-depth consumer market research into the public's perceptions of health and healthcare. They found that perceptions of healthcare delivery were often negative, expressed by words such as red tape and paperwork, but personal health was viewed as more than not being sick, and included lifestyle, life balance, and optimism.

Soon Thrive helped galvanize many Kaiser Permanente initiatives, including the following: (1) food policy—promoting healthy food choices in inpatient food services, cafeterias, and vending machines; (2) farmer's markets—25 facilities in the country have established on-campus farmer's markets offering healthy produce to employees and members; (3) health and wellness initiatives—classes provide instruction in exercise, yoga, tai chi, smoking cessation, mindfulness, and stress re-

duction; (4) Healthy Eating Active Living Community Benefit Programs—these devote several hundred million dollars in services and funding to community organizations to promote the overall health of communities in which Kaiser Permanente is located; and (5) online health tools—tools for weight loss, nutrition, stress reduction, and smoking cessation are now available.¹

In an effort to further deliver on the promise of the expectations created by their advertising campaign, they set out to understand the needs, emotions, and outlook on health of their members. In 2007 they launched a methodical research initiative that covered all eight regions of the country where Kaiser Permanente operated—at their hospitals, medical office buildings, and even competitor facilities. It included walk-throughs, interviews, observational studies, and workshops with various constituents. The research revealed some key themes regarding needs expressed by members with regard to information, clinical care delivery, service, and facilities. They found that information, whether through technology or communication from providers, boosted satisfaction; lack of control or caring made for dissatisfied members. Service and relationships trumped everything, but basics such as cleanliness and convenience were important.

This data was synthesized into a list of 21 key experiences in the hospital that were meant to create a healing environment and bring about faster healing, reduced stress and anxiety, and greater calm and serenity. They include everything from the freeway exit signage, to parking, to the waiting areas, to outdoor spaces, staff rest areas, on-site farmers' markets, cafes, and of course, the patient room and exam room. "Total health" became the design template for their new hospitals and medical office buildings (they are building 26 in California due to seismic retrofit requirements). The template can also be easily adapted to existing spaces, says Bernard

Tyson, executive vice president, health plan and hospital operations. The goal was to make this a cost-neutral proposition, so total health spaces would cost no more than the sterile medical environments of the past.²

In fact, evidence-based design, as it is called by the Center for Health Design, is an approach to healthcare design that is anchored in utilizing proven design features that impact patient health, well-being, and safety, as well as employee health and morale. Studies have shown that single-bed rooms dramatically reduce the number of nosocomial infections; reduce the likelihood of medication and other errors; produce less noise for the patient; better communication from staff to patients and vice versa; superior accommodation of family; and consistently higher satisfaction with overall quality of care. "Acuity adaptable" rooms that allow for the patient to stay in the same room and receive varying levels of care as needed avoids potential dangers caused by patient transfer, such as medication errors and chart loss. Bathrooms built at the headwall to shorten the distance the patient has to walk helps reduce patient falls. Hospitals are increasingly following the *Green Guide for Health Care*,³ which provides tools and best practices for healthy and sustainable building design, construction, and operations for the healthcare industry. Best practices include incorporating views of nature; reducing chemical use; and utilizing greening operations, ranging from serving organic food to housekeeping and landscaping protocols.⁴

When I recently toured the newly constructed Vacaville, California, hospital with the National Facilities Services team led by Paul Tylar and Barbara Denton, their passion was palpable. Years of hard work had come to fruition, and they were recounting stories of patient and employee excitement about the new surroundings—pleasing colors, views from the patient rooms (particularly the infusion therapy clinic that has soothing views of

Solano County farm country), plenty of natural light, open space for employees and families, the new patient room layout with five distinct zones that included a nurse zone and family zone, and healthy food options in the café.

Steve Stricker, MD, physician-in-chief for the Napa-Solano region, who oversaw the construction of two new hospitals, says the new physical space creates higher expectations among patients—they come in expecting an “experience.” To make that happen, staff was trained on how to welcome, register, and escort patients for months in advance. In fact, he says, their door-to-doctor time has dropped to 20 minutes, with the redesign of the physical space being a major contributor. Hospital consumer assessment of healthcare providers and systems scores for the new hospital are now in the 95th percentile in the country, he says, and they are the highest of all Kaiser Permanente facilities. The Vacaville hospital is now attracting physicians from all over the country and from top-notch Ivy League medical schools.

When an organization and industry leader as large and influential as Kaiser Permanente—8.6 million members, 167,000

employees, and 16,000 physicians—makes a move, others stand up and notice. Although they are not the first to do this—many other hospitals around the country are very advanced in their design and many aspects of the cultural shift needed to embody the principles of total health and healing—Kaiser Permanente could have a large impact. An organization-wide project team lead by a team of senior executives that include representatives from service, quality, and operations is tasked with implementing the total health initiatives throughout the Kaiser Permanente system of hospitals and clinics. Let us hope that this bold move will create the momentum needed to push healthcare delivery from traditional sick care to a new model of “health” care, while embracing the whole person.

My very first job in this country was working in the marketing department for an HMO. Quite naive to the workings of the for-profit insurance industry, I was puzzled why an organization named a *health maintenance organization* did nothing to actually improve or maintain the health of its members. Kaiser Permanente is now living up to its slogan (they were recently

named one of Fast Company’s 2010 most innovative companies of the year) by helping us—as their campaign promises—to live long and thrive.

REFERENCES

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