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One Canadian facility emerges from the dark ages

By CARLY WEEKS
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Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health is undergoing a transformation

Anyone who doubts how significant the design of a building can be to patients' health need only visit Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

The country's largest psychiatric hospital, CAMH is in the midst of a massive redevelopment that is transforming its archaic Queen Street facilities into a modern centre that has already won a major international architecture award.

"There's been a huge transformation in our attitudes and our knowledge about what can be done [to treat mental illness]," says the hospital's chief executive officer, Catherine Zahn.

The project won't be complete for several more years, which means that some of CAMH's old buildings are operating alongside the new, state-of-the-art facilities.

The jarring juxtaposition provides a rare opportunity to observe the glaring contrast of health-care design, old and new.

Nowhere is this more clear than on CAMH's old schizophrenia floor. Stepping onto the wing, which is on lockdown at all hours except lunch, you are greeted with the sight of dazed patients in wheelchairs parked in what passes for a lobby in the isolation ward.

A female patient paces through narrow hallways while nurses and other workers are in a cramped station enclosed in glass.

Another woman tries to make a phone call in the noisy, crowded lobby, the only spot on the ward where patients have access to a telephone. The pungent smell of unwashed bodies is crushing.

Here, patients struggling with one of the most debilitating forms of mental illness, characterized by paranoia, thought disorders and even hallucinations, must find a way to recover in the midst of disruptive noise from other patients, which is made louder by the echoing cinder-block walls.

The rooms are small, dark and devoid of much natural light. The only other place for patients to go during the day is through the narrow halls to the front lobby or a lounge consisting of a few beat-up couches and chairs.

Twenty-four patients have to share bathroom facilities and sign up in order to take a shower - a problem for many patients who experience paranoia around others.

The staff does the best it can under the circumstances, but it's clear that patients with schizophrenia face added challenges due to the design of the facility to which they are confined. While a new schizophrenia ward will eventually be built, CAMH spokesman Michael Torres says it's too early to indicate when it will be complete.

Just a few steps away is a new low-rise facility that looks like an ordinary residential apartment building, with red brick on the walls and large windows throughout. This space is for CAMH patients with mood disorders.

Here, patients have spacious private rooms with comfortable beds and chairs as well as large windows that let in natural light and allow patients to see what is happening outside. Each room has a private bathroom with brand-new, modern sinks and showers.

The hallways are wide and quiet enough to hear a pin drop. At the end of the hall, the six patients assigned to each floor have a clean, bright kitchen and living area where they can make meals together, talk or just watch TV.

The new building epitomizes CAMH's new vision of integrating patients into the community and allowing them the comfort, freedom and dignity that is vital to their health.

"I think in the world of design and architecture, there's a belief that space needs to be hopeful and optimistic and connected to the world," Dr. Zahn says. "My eyes were opened to this."

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