



## Designing Your Office for Durability

By Carrie Rossenfeld

When it comes to your practice and your medical office space, it's vital to consider the durability of the materials you choose for flooring, walls, furniture, countertops and sinks. Ignoring this element in favor of lower prices or aesthetics can ultimately cost you big. Using products that aren't durable can mean replacing them sooner than you'd planned, and some poor choices can create an unkempt and even unhealthy environment.

Fortunately, there's a plethora of design solutions that promote durability without sacrificing aesthetics. Read on for MOT's expert tips on designing for durability in all areas of your office.

### Flooring

Choose products with higher static load and low maintenance options, recommends Barbara Dokulil, senior healthcare interior designer for BJAC in Raleigh, N.C. Sheet products versus tile help avoid microbial growth, while porcelain tile is preferred over ceramic in restrooms. Use multi-patterned carpet to avoid wear patterns in high-traffic areas.

Medical-grade roll vinyl flooring is ideal for its durability and ease of cleaning, say Jeff Dusing, communications manager, Todd Hastings, clinical building specialist, and Nick Jonihakis, architect, with MedBuild in Berwyn, Pa. Natural colors are best for hiding dirt, scuff marks and other blemishes.

"Floors in operating and treatment areas must be vinyl or an impermeable poured surface, and must continue for four inches up the sidewalls to eliminate corners where debris can collect," says Mauro C. Romita, M.D., a Manhattan-based aesthetic and reconstructive surgeon. "Porcelain tile or slate tile granite flooring will last 50 years or more and look good."

"Laminate floors sometimes perform better than carpet or vinyl as they take the abuse better and don't stain easily," comments Leslie Markman-Stern, president of Leslie M. SternDesign LTD in Chicago. "Chemicals can damage carpet fibers." If you choose carpeting, go heavyweight with good yarn construction.

Sheet rubber is also very durable and low maintenance as it has no seaming and will clean well, says Nicole Swerski, lead interior designer at BAM Architecture Studio in Manhattan. Traditional composite tile requires waxing, but is also very robust.

Use carpet tile in non-clinical spaces such as lobbies, offices and corridors, and linoleum or VCT in exam rooms, nurse's stations and other locations that are prone to exposure to soiled materials, bodily fluids or medications, recommends Marc Margulies, a principal with Margulies Perruzzi Architects in Boston. When carpet tiles are stained or damaged, they can be replaced individually rather than replacing an entire room. Dark colors or an integral base are best for hiding dirt and scuff marks from vacuuming on vinyl or rubber floors.

### Walls

Corners can show considerable wear and tear – particularly where wheelchairs, carts or gurneys are used frequently. Rather than utilitarian or clinical-looking corner guards, consider strengthened, integral corner beads for a stronger surface that can be touched up with paint when necessary.

Painted drywall with a glossy or semi-glossy finish that can be scrubbed is best to keep patient treatment areas clean, but wipeable, durable wallcoverings can work, too. Fiberglass reinforced panels (FRP) are ideal for patient restrooms due to the durability and ease of cleaning. Vinyl wallcoverings can be easier to maintain than painted surfaces, says Romita. "They cost more initially, but they can last unaltered for many years," he adds.

If you do choose a wallcovering, opt for a sturdy variety that offers more resistance than paint or a weaker wallcovering. Avoid wallcoverings that are porous or have natural fibers in them, as they hold bacteria and don't clean well. Because wallcoverings can have seams that trap bacteria, you should opt for paint, vinyl panels or solid-surface wall protection in high-use areas.

Chair rails are a must for protecting walls behind movable seating.

### Furniture

Always opt for medical-grade furniture, which is built for durability. Buy at least one bariatric chair that will hold heavier patients and consider the fact that furniture with metal legs can withstand weight and wear and tear better than wood or fabric.

Look for stain- and liquid-resistant fabrics on seating, and consider black plastic framed chairs instead of wood, which can get damaged more easily, says Mike Warren, account manager for Rieke Office Interiors in Elgin, Ill.

Fabrics with a "double rub" rating perform well in high-use environments. Vinyl and polyurethane furniture coverings are good choices, and they now come in attractive patterns and colors.

Modular furniture solutions can be moved to accommodate changes in procedures also allow for replacement of individual components should damage occur, says Mollie Everett, senior healthcare program manager for Herman Miller Healthcare in Zeeland, Mich.



Brown seating and neutral tones on the wall camouflage dirt and wear well in Dr. Romita's waiting room.

You should also take advantage of wall-saver leg designs and split back-seat options

#### **Cabinets, countertops and sinks**

Homogeneous materials such as Corian or stainless steel are great for countertops and sink areas, says Lynne Rizk, assistant principal in the healthcare group of New York-based Perkins Eastman.

Consider durable high-pressure plastic laminates on reception desks, exam casework and check-in areas and look for materials that have been tested for use of medical-grade cleaning solutions, particular in nurses' work areas.

Solid-surface, non-porous countertop materials are more durable, easy to clean and inhibit microbial growth, while wood and natural colors hide dirt and fingerprints. Granite is good for your reception desktop or pay area, but not for sterilization areas.

Wood can be impressionable, so opt for metal or a laminate on countertops, and use a PVC edge instead of wood for desk or counter edges. Choose higher-gauge metal for sinks to hold up to surface abuse.

Whichever materials you choose, make sure they're intended for medical office use rather than residential. Use color strategically so it can be updated over time and look for pieces that can be swapped out quickly and easily.