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Bright idea brings welcome dash of colour to dementia ward

A dementia ward has been given a makeover as part of a project that explores how colour can improve the daily experience of patients, visitors and staff.

Edinburgh College of Art and ArtLink – which promotes the role of art in communities – has worked in collaboration with staff at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital and patients’ relatives.

The project team used feedback from carers and staff to draw up their designs.

These took into account areas of the ward that could be disorientating for patients. They also developed more homely smaller spaces where patients can sit with relatives.

The designs reflect emerging understanding of how dementia patients perceive colour.

As the eyes grow dim in old age, people’s perception of space may alter. Bright colours may help to enhance short term memory for directions.

The researchers also considered the physical context as well as the directions of the sunlight, light quality and room usage.

Fourth year architecture students from the On Colour in Architecture course and postgraduate students helped implement the installation.

To help navigation graphics and colour have been used to help lead patients around the all-male ward, which is located in a 1970s building next to the newly developed main building.

Vivid blocks of colour have been introduced at entrances – including an area of strong pink next to the door out to the garden which is designed to help orientation.

A strong red and patterned panel has been installed to be memorable enough to direct the patients’ at the most complex junction in the ward.

Softly curved graphic motifs at junctions on the wards help lead patients around corners and away from doors.

The design responds to light conditions in the hospital so it changes appearance during the day. Small gold squares are dotted over the ceiling of the living area to make the area it more homely.

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Fiona McLachlan, Professor of Architectural Practice at Edinburgh College of Art said: “The project sought to apply research that benefits people living with dementia, their relatives and nursing staff. It also helped our students learn about the role of colour in architecture and to contribute to a community outreach project. Further work on the use of colour and dementia is required and we hope this project can increase awareness of the need for design knowledge to be developed and applied.”

Hospital staff say the project has helped to create a calmer environment.

Senior Charge Nurse, Frank Charleston, said: “There has noticeably been more movement from the patients around the space and patients seem to be making more use of the living area, which is generally thought to be more homely than previous. Patients will also sit with relatives in the circulation areas as well as within private rooms. Since the installation has finished we have also been inspired to add a memory tree and poems on the walls and surfaces.”

The project was funded by a University of Edinburgh Innovation Initiative Grant. The Grant is made possible thanks to the generosity of graduates and friends of the University through their donations to the Edinburgh Fund. The Edinburgh Dulux Decorator Centre donated materials.

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