

Award-Winning Healing Garden

Nature's Power Aids Recovery at Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital

Joint Commission Standard EC.8.10 requires hospitals to establish and maintain an appropriate environment. And what could be more appropriate to the needs of recovering patients, their families and friends, and hospital staff members than a healing garden? Most especially, *this* healing garden.

Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital is a 120-bed facility on the near west side of Chicago, offering physical medicine and rehabilitation. An addition to the hospital was built in 1998, and now, atop its fourth-floor roof, there is a 10,000-square-foot healing garden featuring 6,000 square feet of planting beds. Construction on the garden began in spring 2003 and was completed that fall.

Imagine eye-popping floral displays and a profusion of greenery, designed and arranged to attract and hold your interest 12 months of the year, even during some of the worst of Chicago's winters. Imagine the soothing sound of running water from a waterfall that cascades into a 50-foot stream lined with pebbles and filled with giant koi—a kind of jumbo goldfish. Imagine seating areas where light filters down gently from tree branches overhead. To your left is a children's playground lined with soft rubber tiles. At one end is a basketball half-court where a game is in progress. Throughout the garden are paths where patients can practice their walking skills and where families can enjoy views of Lake Michigan and Chicago's world-famous skyline.

Average inpatient stays at this acute rehabilitation facility range from

two to four weeks, during which time patients are treated for brain and spinal cord injuries, amputations, strokes, and chronic diseases. For many patients, their trip upstairs to the roof garden is the first time in months they're able to go outside. The garden provides a therapeutic and relaxing environment and inspires optimism and hope for their own future.

Dr. Michelle Gittler is a staff physician at Schwab. A donation from her family in memory of her 28-year-old sister was among the contributions that helped make this healing garden a reality. "Right from the time the hospital was constructed in 1998, they planned space here on the roof where patients could enjoy themselves," she recalls. "At first it was only a basketball court. Then some staff members wanted to add a rooftop garden, and management agreed. It's a great way to get away from the hospital without leaving the building. Patients love to go there to practice their walking skills, and families and staff members love to take their meals up there."

The plan at first was to fund the healing garden and the surrounding space through private donations. But in 2002, Schwab received a \$400,000 grant from the City of Chicago's Heat Island Reduction initiative. This was augmented with approximately \$80,000 from private donors.

Designed for Recovery

Mike Wehner is a senior recreation therapist at Schwab who organizes gardening groups made up of patients, staff members, and volunteer master gardeners from the nearby University of Illinois extension school. Together, experts and amateurs plant and do the considerable maintenance work required to care for annuals and perennials, including herbs and vegetables.

The garden's design calls for every feature to be accessible to people with and without disabilities. Most of the garden is located on a raised bed about 24 inches high so it's accessible from a wheelchair. "That means people can enjoy gardening whether they're seated or standing," says Wehner. Many gardens lack color during winter, but quite a few of the plants in the Schwab healing garden were selected because during the winter, they add movement and colors such as red, green, orange, yellow, and even blue. Says Wehner, "That's why our garden is pleasant and inviting year 'round." The garden also



Schwab's rooftop garden calms patients.



Flowers frame a city view, too.

offers stimulation for all five senses. “For example,” says Wehner, “we planted lavender, which has a calming effect.”

Prize-winning Plants

The garden was designed not just for therapy and enjoyment but to cut down on air pollution, as well. That’s one reason Schwab’s healing garden won a first-place award in the Green Roofs category of Chicago’s 51st Annual Mayor’s Landscape Awards Program. In addition, it won a national first place award from Green Roofs for Healthy Cities in 2005. On June 7, 2007, the Gittler family dedicated the healing garden as a memorial to their daughter and sibling. Chicago officials, friends of Schwab Hospital, and master gardeners gathered there to also celebrate the garden for its innovative effort in horticultural therapy and in making Chicago a more environmentally friendly city.

The design and construction process took about five years. First the hospital had to determine how much weight the roof structure could withstand. Fortunately, when the four-story hospital was designed, architects opted for a flat roof with extra reinforcement so another story could be added for future expansion. When the healing garden was constructed, the engineers added two extra layers of insulation and rubber roofing to accommodate the garden. Advice and counsel came from a corps of master gardeners as well as the mayor’s office and the horti-

culturists at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Working with the guidance of designer Martha Tyson, Schwab chose native plants and designed around a Midwestern theme. The planners gave special emphasis to plants that would attract butterflies and birds.

Goals Met and Exceeded

Early in Schwab’s history, for part of the year at least, physical therapists were able to take patients to a park directly across the street for therapy sessions. But the neighborhood is in transition, and the outdoor street-level sessions became problematic. “We wanted an outdoor space that would be safe,” says Gittler. “And we wanted even more to create something beautiful as part of the hospital.”

The first time patients enter the garden, their reaction is a broad smile of delight. “Usually, they want their families to come up and see it,” says Gittler. An area of the garden set aside for kids features a resilient surface where children can crawl and climb and play in relative safety. Therapists like to take their patients to the garden for their therapy sessions, and staff members enjoy lunch and coffee breaks surrounded by plants and greenery. “They’re very proud of it,” says Gittler.

Wehner and his crew of volunteers and master gardeners work for about nine months a year to maintain the garden. He counts about 70 different plants in the garden, including two large beds of lavender plants, plus thyme, oregano, sage, basil, dill, and other herbs. “We also grow a lot of vegetables,” says Wehner, “which we use in cooking groups led by Schwab therapists.”

Dr. Gittler is delighted with the garden. “Just thinking about it makes me smile,” she says. “You can go there,

Healing Spaces, Garden Places

A *healing space* in the field of design for health care facilities includes aesthetic enhancements created to reduce anxiety, promote health and healing among patients, and increase satisfaction among both staff and patients. Healing spaces can range from simply those that are nontoxic to those that are both physically and psychologically safe. The most popular of these healing spaces is a *healing garden*, a horticultural environment that at its best can reduce stressful thoughts, help diminish negative emotions, and evoke positive feelings, all in the service of recovery and healing.

take a deep breath, and enjoy a 270-degree view of the city and the sky and all the downtown buildings. The sunsets and sunrises are truly gorgeous.” While the garden adds significantly to Schwab’s effectiveness in treating patients, Gittler refuses to ascribe a monetary value to it. “Hospitals often look for revenue generators, but this isn’t necessarily one of them. It’s just simply the right thing to do. It contributes to a positive frame of mind and helps people know they can continue to get better.”

Hospital officials believe that the garden lets patients maximize their independence and develop real life skills without leaving the security of the facility. And ongoing access to nature makes the rehabilitation process easier for Schwab patients. Says Wehner, “One should never underestimate the importance of growing things. They have an immediate impact on patients’ attitude and adjustment.” As for the plants themselves, Wehner describes them as “not exotic things. They’re all very welcoming and an easy way to be, with nothing unnatural looking. It all looks right.” 