A sense of homeliness in the hospital environment

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Background: The effect of the hospital environment on health outcomes is a growing field of research. However, research on the patient experience of the hospital environment and the meaning of the environment to patients experiencing a life-threatening illness is still limited.

Aim: This study explores how patients with a life-threatening illness experience being in the hospital environment and the meaning they assign to the environment understood as an integral part of their daily life.

Method: Data was produced through qualitative interviews and observations at a teaching hospital in Denmark from May to September 2011. Twelve patients participated in the study and each patient was interviewed several times. The analysis was guided by the phenomenological-hermeneutical theory of interpretation as presented by Paul Ricoeur.

Findings: Patients experienced that aesthetic decorations and small cosy spots for conversation or relaxation formed a sense of homeliness that influenced their mood positively and allowed them to maintain elements of a known daily life. Further, by bringing some of their private things or undertaking familiar tasks patients was able to maintain a sense of self.

Discussion: The hospital could provide a meaningful space for daily life during illness, when patients experience homeliness through the aesthetic practice of the environment. Maintaining part of their every day life rhythm during hospitalization allowed them to maintain a sense of self that was important for their sense of well-being and personal strength in a vulnerable time of life.

Conclusion: Our findings stress the importance of an aesthetic and home-like hospital environment when experiencing a life-threatening illness. This offers patients an opportunity to maintain a meaningful space for life, to feel safe and keep a foothold in life despite serious illness. Such knowledge could contribute to development of policy making regarding care settings, leadership of developing such environment and provide knowledge leading to an improved clinical caring practice.

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