

Choosing The Colour of Your ICU Matters or Why My Favorite colour is BLUE

20 February 2016
St George Intensive
Care Unit, Sydney



sky

mountains

beach

reef

bush



Theresa Jacques Director ICU

Colours have both symbolic and psychological significance. The colours of our environment can affect our mood and behaviour. Just think of the colours of the seasons and how you feel when spring foliage comes out after a long grey winter.

How much better you feel after long shifts in the 4 walls of an ICU when a bright blue sky with wisps of cloud or a beach or bush scene brightens your world.

I have recently discovered that if choosing the colours for a hospital were left to the bureaucrats, ICU's

would be brown and orange. Brown, yellow and orange have been banned from our ICU since a patient recovering from a long critical illness returned to visit us and recounted how he had nightmares about a big red, yellow and orange beast jumping out at him

Inside this Blog -

About the psychology behind choosing right colour scheme in Intensive Care: It's fascinating to know how colours affect patient's psychology even if they are too unwell to realize this. A/Prof Jacques gives her views why she thinks Blue is the way to go in a future Intensive care unit.





This puzzled me until he gazed around the open plan unit and gave out a cry as he pointed to a wall distant but in sight of the bed he had lain in for a couple of weeks. "There it is!" he was looking at a painting of a row of brightly coloured boats. I moved that art work from the patient area and decided to investigate the psychology of colours further. Recently, a young woman recovering from a critical illness and mild

delirium complained of the large yellow bananas that were invading her room. These turned out to be staff covered in bright yellow gowns for infection control.

Colours are said to evoke physical and emotional responses and different colours promote more of one or the other. I have formed the view there is something in the careful choice of ICU colour that will help critically ill.

patients and their families. Some of my favourite birds, the little kingfisher pictured among them, are coloured blue. It is a calming, relaxing colour. Blue is said to bring down blood pressure and slow respiration and heart rate. It is said to calm the mind and promote clear thought – good for ICU patients and staff alike!

Other positive attributes of blue include communication, trust, efficiency and serenity. I understand serenity but not sure how a colour evokes good communication, trust and efficiency. In any event these are all good for our ICU practice. To prevent blue being chilly make sure your patient rooms have natural light and warm hues for furnishings.

Alternatively choose warmer blues such as periwinkle, or brighter blues such as cerulean or turquoise. Don't go too dark with your blue as this evokes sadness.

Green is said to be a balanced colour, refreshing , restorative and reassuring, but too much becomes boring. Remember Kermit the Frog's claim "It's not easy being green" because he felt he blended in with far too many things and people passed him by but he concluded that green was fine as it evoked the positive feelings associated with Spring.

And what of those reds , oranges and yellows that frightened our patient. Red is said to evoke the "fight and flight" response, no doubt distressing when imprisoned on an ICU



bed. Because of its long wavelength it gives the illusion of being closer than it is and attracts our attention. It stimulates and raises the heart rate. While on a good day it may evoke liveliness and warmth it is best kept for traffic lights and alarms. Orange apparently focuses our minds on physical comforts such as food , warmth and shelter but on a bad day it conjures deprivation. Given our patients have little control over their environment or their next meal it is probably best left out of

ICU. Yellow is said to be an emotional colour and on a bad day evokes irrationality, fear and anxiety, even suicide! Again it is a stimulating colour. In the right place it is said to evoke optimism and confidence, but don't overdo it, as emotions may plummet, giving rise to "the yellow streak". Having advocated for patient focused colour selection for our new Intensive Care Department we have been fortunate to be able to choose our themes. Mindful of the responses various colours can evoke and attempting to improve way finding across the larger department we have settled, in

collaboration with the rebuild project architects, on 5 Australian themes, one for each area. The selected natural landscape themes have allowed a focus on blues and greens with minimisation of reds, yellows and oranges. Art work and furnishings will be chosen to complement these themes. Our aim is to provide a calm and restorative environment, complimented by maximal natural light during the day. The conclusions drawn about the effects of colours in the ICU environment have no strong scientific base. They are formed from "surfing the net", visiting new ICU's, some with consideration to colour themes and some with "standard office" colours and feedback from our ex-ICU patients and families. I am confident the result for our patients will be positive.

