



## ***Two Takes on Hospital Noise***

### ***Hospital Noise on the Increase***

Have you ever had to spend a night in a hospital? Chances are, if you have and you weren't in a coma at the time, your sleep was radically compromised by all of the noise going on around you.

Hospitals have to be kept pristine, so they are usually temples to the beauty and cleanliness of glass and hard, smooth surfaces. This creates the perfect environment for high reverberation levels. When rooms are really 'echoey', noise lingers and speech intelligibility becomes an issue. Understanding the spoken word is critical in hospital rooms, where we all know (at least from watching *ER*) that a doctor's orders can be issued in rapid staccato style, and there is little margin for error.

James West and Ilene Busch-Vishniac published an article about hospital noise in the January 2006 *Acoustics Today*. They cited a study indicating that average hospital interior noise levels have risen from about 56 dB in 1965 to about 70 dB in 2005. Now it's almost as loud as freeway traffic! The authors also state that there's evidence high noise levels exacerbate staff stress and burn out, and that noise may adversely affect the rate of wound healing. The moral is: If you get sick, stay home!

### ***Quiet Hope for Hospitals***

One of our previous newsletters included an article about hospital noise, which concluded: "If you get sick, stay home!" The article discussed the alarming increase in hospital noise levels and quoted a report that hospital noise levels have risen so much that in some places they almost equal freeway traffic noise. Now there may be hope in a program called *Silent Hospitals Help Healing*, or SHHH!

The SHHH! program aims to cut down noise and promote patient healing. It calls for the introduction of very simple measures that can have a significant cumulative impact for patients and staff. For example, nurses must wear soft-soled shoes, set their beepers to vibrate, and make rounds more frequently to minimize the use of the intercom. Hospital telephone ringers are turned down, and patients watch TV using headsets. Where possible, carpets are installed. Gurneys and carts are oiled regularly to cut down squeaking, and nurses use a hand-held pill crusher rather than a loud metal one.

These measures, along with handing out SHHH! buttons to visitors, and posting signs requesting quiet, have reportedly been introduced at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, and Northside Hospital in Atlanta. According to *USA Today*, since implementing the SHHH! program at Montefiore Hospital, noise levels have dropped by 40 dB. In light of these improvements, our new conclusion has to be: "If you get sick, go to the Bronx!"

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