

## An interview with Debra Harris, co-author of *A Practitioner's Guide to Evidence-Based Design*

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**Introduction:** Evidence-based design, or EBD, means different things to different people, so identifying its general parameters is important. The concept of EBD in healthcare is drawing interest because it seeks to gauge the impact of specific designs on productivity, employee and patient morale, and patient outcomes. In *A Practitioner's Guide to Evidence-Based Design*, published by The Center for Health Design, the authors discuss this and other topics, like the importance of publishing new evidence to inform future design decisions. As co-author of this book, Debra Harris discusses this concept over the next few minutes. Dr. Harris holds a PhD in Architecture from Texas A&M University and has more than 25 years of practice experience, specializing in healthcare facility design, assimilating research into evidence-based strategies, and environmental forensics.

**Interviewer:** ***Dr. Harris, why is practice-based research important?***

**Harris:** Practice-based research is important because it provides an opportunity and form a design team about what they're doing and what the benefits are that come from that process. It also provides an opportunity to share that information with other colleagues that can use it to the benefit of their projects as we're trying to elevate the quality of the environment for healthcare facilities. I think that there's a difference in terms of what the level of research is and how you define research. A lot of work that architecture firms do, that is sort of by nature similar to research, is really part of their programming process, where they're collecting information and data and formulating that into a plan of action for their design. When in fact, research is a little bit different that that because there is an entire process or protocol of how one collects the data and secures the data and then analyzes it and formulates that into design criteria that can inform their design process.

**Interviewer:** ***Tell us about the Institutional Review Board.***

**Harris:** The Institutional Review Board is required anytime you are conducting research where you're utilizing participants in the process. And the whole issue behind the IRB is to protect those participants, protect their personal information, their privacy, and their well being. So for instance, if you do a study where you're going to interview or have questionnaires for staff and patients, or collect medical data from their charts, that sort of thing, you would have to have an IRB where there's an Institutional Review Board that is approving and allowing you to enter into that facility and collect that data. And there are a lot of issues in regard to how to get the data, and how to store the data, and how you use the data, and what you can and can't use the data for.

Other kinds of studies in environmental design don't have patients or staff; there are no human subjects that are being used for the study. For instance, you might do a study where you're collecting samples from the environment to test for pathogens that may be harmful to human health. In that case, you still have to file the paperwork with the Institutional Review Board, and basically they will exempt you from the process. And I think what a lot of what architects and designers may not understand is that if you don't have human subjects, it doesn't mean you don't submit to an IRB process, it means that you submit to be exempt. And then you have the documentation that exempts you, which then again, allows you into the facility to collect that data.

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*Interviewer:* **Who's available to help firms go about this process?**

*Harris:* That's a really good question. They really should have a consultant come on board to help facilitate that for them. Most hospitals have an IRB process in their hospitals or within their systems, some of them don't, in which case you have to get an independent IRB and there are 2 to 3 out there.

*Interviewer:* **Why is it important to publish findings?**

*Harris:* Publishing your research is very important part in contributing to the knowledge base. And there are distinctions between where you publish your research and the value that that research holds. I'll submit an article to a peer review journal and after it's published, I will then write another article that's geared towards a certain audience and publish that in a trade journal. And then that way, you're contributing to the knowledge base at the highest level that your research can and then you're able to use that trade journal format or conference proceedings as a way to disseminate that information to the users that you think will benefit that information.

*Interviewer:* Thank you for listening. The *Practitioner's Guide to Evidence-Based Design* is available for purchase at The Center for Health Design's store for \$36. Visit [www.healthdesign.org](http://www.healthdesign.org) for more information.