

Labyrinths offer a new path to health

Elaborate patterns are being used in hospitals and schools to help calm the agitated and provide a place to meditate, writes Ainslie MacGibbon.

Feeling stressed? Anxious? Being sent on a walk through a labyrinth may not seem the best way to calm the nerves.

But labyrinths are now being used as legitimate medical tools to help calm the agitated and to provide people with a quiet place to meditate.

Labyrinths are often confused with mazes. But while mazes are made to confuse and lose, labyrinths are designed to send people in one direction only, so their minds can relax. While a maze throws up wrong turns and dead ends, a labyrinth offers a single path which leads to a centre that is retraced on the way out.

Some say labyrinths act as a metaphor for travelling inwards to the soul. Others say they act as a calming device because they simply provide people with a contemplative space to meditate. Whatever the reason, their success is catching on. Labyrinths have been built in hospitals across the United States for surgeons to walk through before surgery to focus, for jittery friends and family waiting while loved ones undergo cancer treatment and for stressed nurses and fragile patients.



Labyrinths are also being built in schools to be used by anxious students or for those with behavioural problems. Small, finger labyrinths are also used in class as a calming device and an aid in concentration. Here the labyrinth path is traced with a finger and often double labyrinths are used so both hands work at the same time.

Michael Stevens, a paediatric oncologist at the Children's Hospital, Westmead, says labyrinths are an excellent tool for frightened, anxious and worried people - "all those emotions we have in spades here at the hospital".

"A labyrinth in the grounds would be very helpful and would benefit our patients, staff, and visiting family and friends," Stevens says. A site for a labyrinth is being negotiated in the hospital's development plans.

Stevens says the labyrinth is the perfect vehicle for meditation. "You can walk knowing you will be led somewhere, but the mind is quietened, relaxed and brings things into focus. In a maze we lose ourselves, but in a labyrinth we find ourselves. You could say they have resurged historically when there is a need."

But he warns that people should not expect labyrinths to heal. "We need to be cautious not to confer on the labyrinth that it can heal. It's more about helping people cope, make decisions and relax - but these are all the things that do ultimately benefit us. But something that can make you feel that good at times, has to be good for you. Children love walking labyrinths, they 'get it' straight away."

Stevens has run workshops in a portable canvas labyrinth where sceptical colleagues have turned up only to be converted.

In last month's issue of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians' *RACP News*, Stevens explains that labyrinths have been around for at least 3000 years. A modern resurgence of labyrinths began in the US in the late 1980s, and is spreading slowly to other countries, including Australia. There are now more than 1000 labyrinths across the US, including at least 170 in hospitals.

The most common labyrinth designs are the classical Cretan seven-circuit labyrinth and the medieval labyrinth, often referred to as the "Chartres" style after the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral near Paris.

Helen Malcolm, a GP and senior lecturer in rural general practice at the University of Melbourne, uses a portable canvas labyrinth with patients and staff members. Construction of a labyrinth will soon begin at the rural clinical school in the university's Shepparton campus.

Malcolm says the scientific evidence is well established that meditation helps physical and mental health, and the labyrinth is a walking form of meditation.

"The response by patients is hugely variable," she says. "For some there is a sense of calmness, some come out feeling like singing, and some certainly emerge with a solution to a problem, or feeling stronger. For staff it is extremely good as a stress management tool."

Malcolm intends to research the impact of labyrinths in health settings, because "there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence supporting labyrinths, but the formal research isn't there yet".

Source:

MacGibbon, A, The Sydney Morning Herald (16/09/2010) 'Labyrinths offer a new path to health' [Online] [SMH.com.au Health&Style](http://www.smh.com.au/Health&Style) Available <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/wellbeing/labyrinths-offer-a-new-path-to-health-20100915-15cs7.html> [Accessed 6th Oct 2010]