Being admitted into a hospital can often be a frightening experience. The sterile environment does nothing to put one at ease or feel reassured that everything is going to be ok. This is true of many hospitals, but not at North Valley Hospital located in Whitefish, Montana. North Valley embraces the Planetree philosophy that promotes the nurturing of body, mind and spirit in a patient-centered environment. The amazing staff at North Valley is committed to the stewardship of healthcare resources in order to continually improve the health of the communities they serve.

While visiting with Naomi Morrison, Community Relations Coordinator at North Valley Hospital, she discussed with me the importance of communication between hospital staff, patients and families in providing truly individualized care for each patient. I learned that Planetree seemed a natural choice for North Valley. The hospital had been using this method of patient care for years, but didn’t know that it was part of a global movement to treat all patients with kindness and compassion in a holistic approach while meeting their needs. Human need plays an important part in the healing process. Care giving is best achieved through kindness and compassion while providing high quality care. North Valley realizes that family, friends, and loved ones are vital to the healing process. It is their goal to provide options and knowledge to help individuals participate in their health care.

Angelica Thieriot is the founder of the Planetree philosophy. She battled a rare viral infection and spent many hours in a hospital staring at cold, blank walls. She received great medical care as nurses rushed about the hospital taking care of her, but her individual needs were not a consideration. Angelica spent hours of her recovery feeling lonely and afraid. She was saddened at the lack of personalized care to the point that it overshadowed the benefits of the hospital’s high-tech services. Her experience led Angelica to envision a totally different type of hospital where patients would receive care in a truly healing environment that would provide them with access to the information needed to become an active participant in their personalized journey to wellness. Since its inception in 1978, Planetree has developed methods for personalizing, humanizing and demystifying the healthcare experience for patients and their families.

North Valley’s website (www.nvosp.org) explains their mission best: “Since embracing the Planetree philosophy in September of 2002, North Valley has identified six areas of focus in creating a patient-centered facility. They include: healing design and arts, communication, customer service, health resources, complementary therapies and spirituality. Each of these areas is steered by a committee comprised of staff, physicians and community members. Our progress has taken the efforts and ideas of many individuals including those who are in most direct daily contact with patients and families and have been the eyes and ears to direct our efforts toward true patient-centered care.”

Mary Stehan, Planetree Coordinator, elaborated, “We subscribe to the philosophy that the best way we can serve our patients and the community is by providing the latest in medical technology in a healing and nurturing environment. Incorporating Planetree into North Valley Hospital is a natural way of creating the environment we want for our patients. The Planetree model of care calls on us to focus on the total patient—mind, body and spirit—and to place them at the center of their healthcare. By incorporating Planetree principles
ranging from Healing Design to Human Touch to Healthy Communities we are guided to care for our patients, their caregivers, and our community in a kind, caring and holistic way. Our commitment is reflected in the design of our facility, the Community Health Resource library which is open to the public, the availability of complementary therapies like massage and acupuncture, our dog visitation and music programs among many other initiatives. We can recognize our success in good numbers—increased patient and physician satisfaction, decreased staff turnover, decreased length of stay, etc.—but we know the greatest return is in the way our patients and families feel—they have received the best possible care in a caring environment.”

The beautifully designed patient rooms at North Valley encourage the patient to relax and focus on his/her recovery. The walls are painted in warm tones of browns and greens—no sterile white walls here! Rather, these soothing walls are enhanced with local pieces of artwork of Glacier Park scenery, Flathead Lake and Montana memorabilia all tastefully displayed throughout the hospital. North Valley strives to provide a comforting environment not only for the patient, but for their loved ones as well. The waiting areas provide inviting furniture and ample space for families to wait while their loved ones are being cared for.

Each person involved with a patient is encouraged to play an active role in the patient’s healing process. One way available is the hospital’s impressive community library that provides patients, family members, staff and the public access to health-related resources. The hospital’s music program provides a harpist that plays weekly for patients in their rooms, and Delta Society certified dogs and handlers are invited to provide companionship for patients on pet visitation days. North Valley understands the important part relaxation plays in treatment and takes their commitment to patient care to the next level by providing a complimentary 15-minute massage (by a certified massage therapist) to their patients prior to surgery, post partum or with a doctor’s order for inpatients.

After my tour, I enjoyed lunch in the Valley Café, and again was made aware of North Valley’s obvious dedication to their community. The fare offered in this amazing restaurant is top-notch: freshly made soups, salads, entrees and hot-off-the-grill burgers are of high-end restaurant quality—without the high-end price. Did I forget to mention the desserts? They are scrumptious and baked on site.

According to their website, North Valley provides a hi-tech, “hi-touch” hospital experience: “By equipping our hospital with the most current technologies, our patients receive the most accurate imaging diagnoses and the most efficient surgery experience. We recruit nationally for physicians and surgeons in various specialties, with educations from medical schools such as Johns Hopkins University to contract with us as hospitalists or accept positions as active staff while maintaining practices in our communities. We maintain a high retention rate among our entire staff because of our team-oriented efforts to provide the kind of care that was their reason for going into a healthcare profession.

“Our unique patient-centered care approach has established a compassionate embrace of our community. We not only provide diagnoses, treatments, medication and 24-hour observation, but also the caring environment that is needed by patients to heal as quickly and healthfully as possible. North Valley Hospital encourages loved ones to be with our patients. Our 24-hour visitation policy, coupled with a daybed in each patient room that’s available for overnight stays, allows patients and their guests comfort and ease while visiting.”

In summary: “Planetree is a journey, not a destination; our evolution in the direction of its ideals will continue for the coming years.”