




Fall 2009

Failure and Success: Paul R. Sieber, Nelson F. Fisher, and the Fifty-Year Struggle for the Gettysburg College Health Center

Dallas A. Grubbs
Gettysburg College

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Grubbs, Dallas A., "Failure and Success: Paul R. Sieber, Nelson F. Fisher, and the Fifty-Year Struggle for the Gettysburg College Health Center" (2009). *Hidden in Plain Sight Projects*. 13.
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Failure and Success: Paul R. Sieber, Nelson F. Fisher, and the Fifty-Year Struggle for the Gettysburg College Health Center

Description

In the winter of 1954, four men and one woman set out to accomplish a goal that Gettysburg College had been pursuing for more than forty years. All five of them were trustees of the college, and together they formed a special committee within the Board of Trustees. They were the Infirmary Committee, a small body composed of Paul R. Sieber, Nelson F. Fisher, Mrs. Charles W. Baker, John H. Beerits, and Arthur Hendley. In 1954, following one of the most violent outbreaks of influenza ever to strike the college campus, Chairman Hiram H. Keller authorized Paul Sieber, a prominent alumnus, surgeon, and five-year member of the Board of Trustees, to chair a committee whose goal was to “bring in a report at the Annual Meeting in June as to the manner of raising money for the „Infirmary” Fund.” The establishment of this committee would prove to be the first step towards the erection of a new infirmary, a modern medical center that the college desperately needed. For years, the Infirmary Committee’s predecessors on the Board of Trustees had attempted to raise funds for the purpose of establishing a permanent medical facility. However, the influx of funds proved inadequate, and the board was forced to put aside its plans for a new infirmary. Finally, in 1954, Dr. Paul R. Sieber was appointed chairman of the Infirmary Committee. He and Dr. Nelson F. Fisher, the vice chairman of the committee, would charge forth with renewed zeal, determined to lay the foundation of a new infirmary. Their efforts would result in the establishment of the Sieber-Fisher Infirmary, more commonly known as the Health Center. Today, their efforts are recognized on the eastern wall of the center’s waiting room, on a prominent brown and gold plaque that bears their names. [*excerpt*]

Course Information:

- Course Title: *HIST 300: Historical Method*
- Academic Term: Fall 2009
- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

Hidden in Plain Sight is a collection of student papers on objects that are “hidden in plain sight” around the Gettysburg College campus. Topics range from the Glatfelter Hall gargoyles to the statue of Eisenhower and from historical markers to athletic accomplishments. You can download the paper in pdf format and click “View Photo” to see the image in greater detail.

Keywords

Gettysburg College, infirmary, health center, Infirmary Committee, Paul R. Sieber, Nelson F. Fisher, Mrs. Charles W. Baker, John H. Berrits, Arthur Hendley, medical facility, influenza

Disciplines

History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | United States History

Campus Location

Sieber-Fisher Infirmary

Gettysburg College

Hidden in Plain Sight

Failure and Success: Paul R. Sieber, Nelson F. Fisher, and the Fifty-Year Struggle
for the Gettysburg College Health Center

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Dallas A. Grubbs

Fall 2009

In the winter of 1954, four men and one woman set out to accomplish a goal that Gettysburg College had been pursuing for more than forty years. All five of them were trustees of the college, and together they formed a special committee within the Board of Trustees. They were the Infirmary Committee, a small body composed of Paul R. Sieber, Nelson F. Fisher, Mrs. Charles W. Baker, John H. Beerits, and Arthur Hendley. In 1954, following one of the most violent outbreaks of influenza ever to strike the college campus, Chairman Hiram H. Keller authorized Paul Sieber, a prominent alumnus, surgeon, and five-year member of the Board of Trustees, to chair a committee whose goal was to “bring in a report at the Annual Meeting in June as to the manner of raising money for the ‘Infirmary’ Fund.”¹ The establishment of this committee would prove to be the first step towards the erection of a new infirmary, a modern medical center that the college desperately needed. For years, the Infirmary Committee’s predecessors on the Board of Trustees had attempted to raise funds for the purpose of establishing a permanent medical facility. However, the influx of funds proved inadequate, and the board was forced to put aside its plans for a new infirmary. Finally, in 1954, Dr. Paul R. Sieber was appointed chairman of the Infirmary Committee. He and Dr. Nelson F. Fisher, the vice chairman of the committee, would charge forth with renewed zeal, determined to lay the foundation of a new infirmary. Their efforts would result in the establishment of the Sieber-Fisher Infirmary, more commonly known as the Health Center. Today, their efforts are recognized on the eastern wall of the center’s waiting room, on a prominent brown and gold plaque that bears their names.

Prior to the establishment of the Sieber-Fisher Infirmary, Gettysburg College had used multiple buildings and rooms within buildings as medical centers. The first place on the college

1. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, The Mid-Winter Meeting of the Gettysburg College Board of Trustees, December 13, 1955. Musselman Library: Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

campus to be specifically designated as a hospital ward was a room on the first floor of Glatfelter Hall. Though it was meant to be a strictly medical facility, it was mainly used for storage. After an outbreak of contagions in December of 1913, the Board of Trustees, John F. Dapp presiding, made its first attempt to raise funds for the purpose of building a small infirmary adjacent to Glatfelter Hall. Under President William A. Granville, “Gettysburg struggled to expand its physical plant. Repeated capital campaigns pointing towards a ‘greater Gettysburg’ yielded disappointing results.”² In one of the first failed fundraising attempts, the Board of Trustees authorized a call for \$130,000; \$5,000 of this was to be set aside for a new infirmary. After four years of fundraising, however, the board had yet to procure half of the \$130,000 goal. “In June 1917, two months after the United States entered World War I, President Granville informed the board that the building fund had accumulated \$60,000 in gifts and pledges, but also that since January he had ‘not been able to do much in the way of soliciting for funds because of the unsettled conditions due to the world war.’ Small amounts continued coming in, but clearly the momentum had been lost.”³ This lack of funding coincided with a second major outbreak of contagious disease, and the college was forced to use the observatory as a makeshift infirmary for the ill students. A modern medical center, once a desideratum, was rapidly becoming a necessity.

In 1923, Gettysburg College transformed the old Athletic Field House at the corner of Lincoln and Washington Streets into a sick ward for the students. Three years later, it was moved once again. This time, a residence on West Lincoln Avenue owned by the college became the

2. Michael J. Birkner and David Crumplar, *Gettysburg College* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 39.

3. Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutory Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985*, vol. 2 (Mechanicsburg, PA: W&M Printing, 1987), 432.

college infirmary. The staff remained the same, with the notable addition of “Mrs. Margaret E. Miller, who was nurse from 1926 to 1940.”⁴ Mrs. Miller became well-known among the student body, and the college community was very much aggrieved at her death in 1940.⁵ This building remained unchanged as the official college medical center until 1947, when a second ward was constructed alongside the original. West Lincoln Avenue now contained two infirmaries, one for each sex. The newest ward was for the men, the original for the women. During this time, the Board of Trustees continued to support the building of a larger and newer structure, but funds for the project remained low. In 1949, the effort was rejuvenated by a new trustee and a strong advocate of health and wellness. Dr. Paul R. Sieber, an alumnus and respected surgeon, would serve on the Board of Trustees for fifteen years and emerge as a leader in the movement to establish the current health center.

Paul Rothrock Sieber was born on July 9, 1886 in Connellsville, Pennsylvania. He attended the Gettysburg public schools and the Gettysburg Academy, enrolling at Gettysburg College in 1903. While in college, he acquired the nickname “Polly,” a moniker he would keep for the rest of his life. In addition to being active in the Xi Chapter of the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity and the Pen and Sword Society,⁶ Sieber was also a three-sport athlete. As a halfback and kicker in football, a second baseman in baseball, and a forward in basketball, he set numerous school records and earned a reputation as a spectacular athlete. On the gridiron, Polly

4. *ibid*, 514

5. The fact that President Henry W.A. Hanson helped officiate the funeral is a testament to the affection the college community felt for its nurse. See Mrs. Miller Passes, *The Gettysburgian*, September 19, 1940.

6. The Pen and Sword Society disbanded in 1943 and was never reorganized. “The purpose of the Society was...to honor those, who by their energy and successful efforts in furthering the prestige of the College in the past, show that they are willing and capable of exerting themselves in a special manner in the interest and welfare of the Alma Mater in the future.” See *Fourteenth Annual Public Exercises of Pen and Sword Society*, 1912. Pen and Sword Society Papers, Box 1. Special Collections: Musselman Library.

Sieber had no equal. “During his four years of varsity play he scored 249 points, including 14 field goals.”⁷ In the Bullet Hole, a casual dining facility on the campus, a photomontage on the western wall prominently displays a photograph of this legendary footballer. In the upper right hand corner of the collage stands Polly Sieber, dressed for success in his football gear and protective pads. Standing erect, with his arms casually dangling at his sides and with the slightest hint of a smile, he appears confident and ready to lead his team to victory.⁸

Sieber found success on and off the field, and solid grades and a competitive nature lead him to pursue graduate school. After graduating from Gettysburg College in 1907, Sieber moved sixty miles to the southeast and relocated to Johns Hopkins University. Years of participation in competitive sports had imbued him with a strong interest in health and the human body, and as a young man aspiring to become a doctor Johns Hopkins University was a natural choice. He graduated from the medical school in 1911 with an M.D. degree in surgery. Around this time, Sieber became familiar with a young woman named Georgia Brownlee and began courting her. While Sieber was venturing out into exotic lands of love and the medical practice, the arms race between Great Britain and Germany was reaching its height and propelling Europe towards war. In 1917, at the age of thirty-one, Dr. Sieber answered President Wilson’s call for troops and enlisted in the United States Army Medical Corps. As a chief surgeon in the American Expeditionary Force, Sieber was stationed at the AEF headquarters in northeastern France. While the soldiers were fighting on the front, Sieber was engaged in combat of a different sort. With the advent of machine guns and other improved weapons, skilled surgeons became invaluable to the

7. Robert L. Bloom, “Intercollegiate Athletics at Gettysburg College 1879-1919,” *The Gettysburg Bulletin*, December 1976, 19.

8. This same picture, and a short paragraph outlining Sieber’s accomplishments, can be found in Michael J. Birkner and David Crumplar, *Gettysburg College* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 45.

army. When his enlistment expired, Sieber returned to the United States with the intention of marrying his sweetheart Georgia Brownlee. The two were wed on March 27, 1919.

After serving his time in the armed forces and marrying, Sieber resumed the medical practice. He and his new wife moved to Pittsburgh, where he served as assistant professor of surgery at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine for a year. Following his brief stint as a professor, he began practicing as a surgeon at Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh. The birth of a son, Paul R. Sieber, Jr., in 1922 was followed by the birth of a second son, John Sieber, in 1926. The Siebers remained in Pittsburgh, and Paul's reputation as a skilled surgeon increased. In March of 1928, he co-founded the Pittsburgh Surgical Society, "a voluntary, educational, and scientific organization dedicated to the promotion of the finest traditions of the profession."⁹ The medical practice kept Sieber very busy, and he had little time for visits to his alma mater. Although his business stopped him from making the trip to Gettysburg, his generous contributions to the college's athletic programs and his achievements in medicine did not go unnoticed by the college. The school granted him back-to-back awards: an honorary Doctor of Science degree in 1938 and the Alumni Meritorious Service award in 1939. Ten years later, in 1949, the college bestowed upon Dr. Sieber what is perhaps the greatest honor it can give—a trusteeship. As a trustee, Sieber was dedicated to promoting health and wellness among the student population. Attempts to raise the funds for a new health center, however, continued to fail. In 1954, the Board of Trustees welcomed a second doctor, Nelson F. Fisher, into its fold. Sieber and Fisher would lead the way in establishing a new and modern infirmary.

Nelson Franklin Fisher was born in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania on July 1, 1895. He

9. As of 2007, the organization boasted 176 members. "Pittsburgh Surgical Society," Allegheny County Medical Society, <http://www.acms.org/spec/pss.html> (accessed September 20, 2009).

attended the local Selinsgrove Area High School before matriculating into the Gettysburg College class of 1918. Fisher was not particularly active in Greek life or sports, but he was a member of the Pen and Sword Society and the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society. Like Paul Sieber, he heard the call to arms and immediately after graduation he enlisted in the United States Army. As an infantryman on the western front, Fisher rose quickly through the ranks to become a second lieutenant. He served from 1918 until the war's conclusion in 1919, at which time he returned to Pennsylvania. He too received the aesculapian call and enrolled in the University of Chicago Medical School in 1919. He earned a PhD degree from the institution in 1923 and went on to earn his M.D. from Rush Medical School. After acquiring his degrees, he accepted a professorship at the Baylor University Medical School in Texas. His position at Baylor lasted only one year, however, and he returned to Illinois to teach Physiology at the University of Illinois College of Medicine. He permanently abandoned teaching in 1928 to practice internal medicine in Chicago, the field in which he excelled. Over the course of his medical career, Fisher would publish "numerous medical papers dealing with glands and internal secretions."¹⁰

On September 15, 1930, Nelson Fisher married Miriam Wilber. Between 1931 and 1947, the couple produced five children—Wilbur, Diane, Lynn, Carla, and Kim, respectively. Fisher continued his lucrative medical practice in Chicago, Illinois, and was generous towards his alma mater. He habitually donated to the college's many causes, and was most likely one of the significant contributors to Paul Sieber's infirmary campaign. Gettysburg College took note of its alumnus' generosity, and was determined to show its gratitude. The year 1954 was a significant one for both Fisher and the college; early in the year he was awarded the Alumni Meritorious Service Award. Later, on June 4, 1954, the Board of Trustees voted and elected Fisher to the

10. "Dr. Nelson F. Fisher," *Gettysburg College Bulletin: Alumni Edition*, Vol. XLIX (July 1959), 45.

board. Dr. Fisher was now a member of the Gettysburg College Board of Trustees, a position from which he would help make the contribution to the college that bears his name.

Though the closeness of their friendship is not certain, it is understood that Fisher and Sieber had an exceptional working relationship. The two men had shared similar experiences, overcome similar obstacles, and pursued mutual goals. They were both alumni of Gettysburg College, members of the Pen and Sword Society, soldiers in the Great War, professors at medical schools, and doctors of medicine. When it became evident that a new infirmary must be constructed, the two men were the natural choice to lead the campaign. The board named Paul R. Sieber chairman of an Infirmary Committee, with Nelson F. Fisher serving as vice chairman. These two gentlemen, along with the other two men and one woman who composed the Infirmary Committee, would make the health center one of their top priorities.

When a new wave of influenza swept the campus in the fall of 1954, the small two-chambered infirmary on West Lincoln Avenue's 200-block was swamped with febrile students. At its December meeting, the Infirmary Committee "reported to the Board the busiest fall in the history of the College Health Service."¹¹ The committee stressed that a newer and larger infirmary was essential to maintaining the health of the student body. The board agreed, and authorized the committee to raise the appropriate funds. The Infirmary Committee turned to the college's medical alumni for backing, but the pattern of falling well short of the goal remained consistent. For five years, Sieber and Fisher worked tirelessly to secure pledges. By 1959, however, they had still secured only half of their original goal. The effort was revitalized in 1959, when the board authorized a major fundraising campaign to raise "\$1,640,000, \$160,000

11. Report of the Infirmary Committee to the Board of Trustees, The Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 1955. Musselman Library: Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

of which was to go to ‘ infirmary with equipment.’”¹² This effort was also largely unsuccessful, and the board was forced to reconsider its situation.

From the failed campaign, two factions emerged from within the Board of Trustees. One side supported “converting Buehler Hall [a house at 249 Carlisle Street purchased in 1954] into an infirmary.”¹³ They concluded that “while a new building was definitely preferable, conversion of Buehler was a practical expedient.”¹⁴ The other faction, led by Sieber and Fisher, claimed that a new infirmary was crucial to maintaining the health of students and that construction should proceed; they had faith that the money would eventually present itself. The debate continued, until a sudden tragedy brought deliberations to a halt. In early March, Nelson Fisher was diagnosed with myeloma, a pernicious and quick-spreading cancer. He retired to his home in Chicago, where he died six weeks later. “Dr. Nelson Franklin Fisher died on April 25th, at the age of sixty-three.”¹⁵ Although the Board of Trustees was aware of the gravity of his disease, they were still struck by the suddenness of his death. Empty chairs have a way of uniting factions and binding wounds. In the June 1959 meeting, the trustees put the matter to vote. The board resolved that a new medical center was indeed in the best interest of the college and approved the construction of an infirmary. The new building was to be erected on West Broadway and be ready in time for the fall semester.

12. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, The Mid-Winter Meeting of the Gettysburg College Board of Trustees, December 8, 1959. Musselman Library: Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

13. Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutory Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985*, vol. 2 (Mechanicsburg, PA: W&M Printing, 1987), 840.

14. *ibid*, 840.

15. “Dr. Nelson F. Fisher,” *Gettysburg College Bulletin: Alumni Edition*, Vol. XLIX (July 1959), 45.

Construction began in the summer of 1959, and “the cost was \$161,300,”¹⁶ \$1,300 more than the estimated amount. Capital continued to trickle in, and the board was able to make its payments. By October, the structure was finished and in the process of being equipped. In that same month, “Polly” Sieber was invited by President Willard S. Paul to be the guest of honor at the college’s homecoming football game. While attending the festivities, he was informed that the building he had struggled to see completed would be named in his honor and in the honor of Nelson F. Fisher. Sieber gratefully accepted this distinction, and was pleased when the infirmary was put into service later in the month. In the December 6th meeting of the Board of Trustees, Sieber “stated his committee had no additional report, but that he wishes to express his personal gratification in seeing the completion and operation of the New Infirmary.”¹⁷ Finishing touches were added to the infirmary over the next two years, until the building was ready to be formally dedicated. “On June 2, 1962, it was dedicated as the Sieber-Fisher Infirmary, in honor of Paul R. Sieber and in memory of Nelson F. Fisher, the two men whose exertions had helped in a major way to make it a reality.”¹⁸ The plaque located on the eastern wall of the center’s waiting room commemorates this dedication ceremony and immortalizes the efforts of Sieber and Fisher. The building would continue to be referred to as an infirmary until 1985, when its title was changed to the Health and Counseling Center. Though the appellation may have changed, the location did not. The Health Center is located at 250 West Broadway and, although it is no longer a full service infirmary, continues to be a haven for those in need of physical or mental aid.¹⁹

16. Glatfelter, 840.

17. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, The Mid-Winter Meeting of the Gettysburg College Board of Trustees, December 6, 1960. Musselman Library: Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

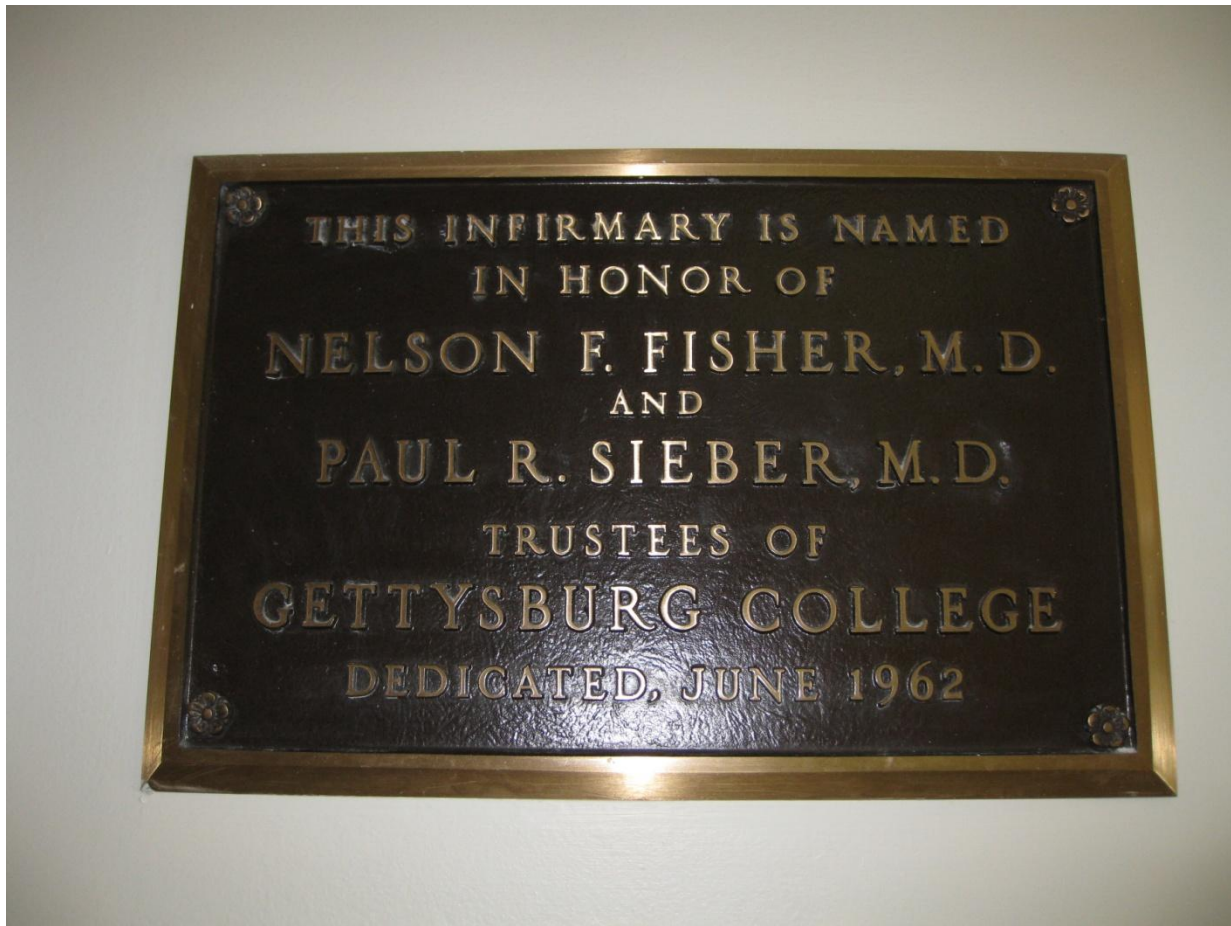
18. Glatfelter, 840.

Paul Sieber continued to serve on the Board of Trustees until 1964. After retiring from the board, he “remained loyal to his alma mater. Near the end of his life he told Henry T. Bream that he devoutly wished that at least one grandson would attend and be graduated from Gettysburg College.”²⁰ He lived for another decade after resigning from the board and died peacefully in his Pittsburgh home on February 25, 1975, at the age of eighty-eight. He had lived to see the completion of the long-awaited infirmary and passed from this life into the next with the knowledge that he had made a great contribution to his alma mater. He and Nelson Fisher had struggled and ultimately overcome the challenges that had plagued their predecessors. After more than fifty years of failure, Gettysburg College finally succeeded in establishing a modern and permanent medical facility on the campus. This success can be largely credited to these two men who invested their time, money, and effort into the cause.

Today, the Health Center is a dwarf surrounded by giants. Flanked by the Dining Center to the southeast and the Bream Wright Hauser Athletic Complex to the west, it is easy to overlook the small brick building on West Broadway. Most students who enter the Health Center typically have too much on their minds to concern themselves with the facility’s history. As a result, the plaque that adorns the wall of the waiting room is largely ignored. But to the men who worked towards the creation of the center, and to the researcher who pursues their story, the plaque has a valuable and distinct meaning. It memorializes the hard work and dedication of two men, whose efforts resulted in the creation of the structure that we today call the Health Center.

19. The Health Center offers a variety of services: immunizations, assessments of illnesses, STD diagnosis, contraceptive aid, counseling services, and many more.

20. Sieber’s wish was never realized. If my research is correct, he is the only Sieber to graduate from Gettysburg College. Robert L. Bloom, “Intercollegiate Athletics at Gettysburg College 1879-1919,” *The Gettysburg Bulletin*, December 1976, 19.



The Plaque, Located in the middle of the eastern wall of the Health Center lobby

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