

Metropolitan News

Monday, January 20, 1975

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Probe Reveals More 'Mismanagement' In Stockton Hospital

By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

The death of a 9-year-old boy and the alleged embezzlement of patient money are only the most startling revelations to come out of a state investigation into conditions at Stockton State Hospital.

But there are many, perhaps lesser, incidents contained in accounts of the investigation—incidents which point to what Health Department officials say is "bad management" at the Stockton facility.

Material from the investigation contains accounts of questionable treatment methods, problems with security and dirty or lost laundry, possible sexual exploitation of patients and reports of alleged patient abuse by employes.

That at least some of the incidents

occurred has been substantiated by Health Department investigators. It has been confirmed, for example, that a 35-year-old female patient and a 17-year-old male patient were allowed to spend two weekends together at a Stockton motel. Investigators say there is no evidence that the two engaged in sexual activity. The woman, according to hospital reports, "has a history of outwardly displayed homosexual tendencies," and the two shared only expenses and companionship.

Hospital patients who are able to fit into a community setting are encouraged to leave the institutional environment whenever possible, so officials say here is nothing inherently wrong with the fact the two were allowed to leave the grounds. But Don Z. Miller, the Health Department's

deputy director who was in charge of the full investigation, says "bad judgment" was exercised by hospital personnel who permitted the two to stay together off hospital grounds.

A report of a female patient being seen nude in a Stockton bar, in the company of a male from the community, could not be substantiated. Nor could reports that improper treatment methods—including use of a control technique called "choking out" (in which a nerve in a patient's neck is pinched to cause unconsciousness) had been utilized at Stockton.

There was some evidence, however, that some patients had been placed in restraints to control them, without any serious effort to devise a treatment method which would prevent the behavior requiring physical restraints. Miller feels those occur-

ences were more a result of inadequate staff training in treatment methods for retarded persons than overt mistreatment.

Dr. James Shelton, the Porterville State Hospital medical director who was called in by Miller as a consultant in the Stockton investigation recommended that Miller give Stockton medical director Dr. John Freeman and administrator Walt Laputz a clear expression of approval and support—a recommendation which Miller declined to adopt.

The deputy director has placed Freeman and other unnamed Stockton employes on a kind of probation until he is satisfied conditions have improved at the hospital. At least one top state health official recommended Freeman be terminated as medical director.

"I was not dissatisfied with Dr. Shelton's report," Miller said, "but I disagreed with his recommendation that we say Laputz and Freeman were doing an outstanding job."

Much of the raw data upon which the investigation was based—including accounts of the 1972 death and the alleged embezzlement—was provided by the Concerned Citizens Action Committee, a group formed within the past year and composed primarily of the parents of state hospital patients.

The committee is a kind of parent splinter group which is not directly affiliated with the official state hospital parents group in Stockton, although some parents are members of both.

Members of the committee have been speaking out against hospital

conditions and clashing with hospital administrators ever since the facility was transformed in 1972 from a hospital for the mentally ill to one for the retarded.

Three women, all mothers of retarded children, have spearheaded the group: Carol Ferreira, a Stockton realtor and longtime volunteer at the hospital; Carolyn Padilla, who with her husband Lester is a member of the citizens review committee appointed by Miller to analyze the state investigation; and Marie White, a San Francisco social worker who as former executive director of the San Joaquin Association for the Retarded clashed repeatedly with hospital administrators over conditions at the facility.

Although members of Concerned
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Citizens have been hotly criticized for not working "within the system" by some parents and professionals in the field of care for the retarded, the bulk of their contentions about Stockton have been documented by state investigators.

"In any problem area they brought to our attention, their accusations proved to be factual," said Don Stockman, a Health Department official who coordinated much of the state investigation. "They provided us with documents and dates, and just about everything they told us seemed to be true."

Although the Concerned Citizens had been meeting and complaining to hospital officials about conditions at the facility since last summer, it took widespread publicity about the October injury of a 6-year-old mentally retarded boy, Michael McKibben of Sacramento, to prompt a full investigation into operations at the hospital.

What investigators found was a his-

tory of mishandled crises (such as the McKibben injuries and the 1972 death of a 9-year-old boy), irate parents who say their complaints are ignored and disgruntled employees who insist the hospital is understaffed. As a result of the investigation, reforms in hospital operations have been announced, and Health Department officials say they are examining procedures at other state hospitals to make certain similar occurrences are avoided at those facilities.

The problems at Stockton, they say, can be traced to several factors unique to that facility: inadequate staff training during the hospital's 1972 conversion from a facility for the mentally ill to one for the retarded, a higher average age of employees, who take more vacation and sick leave, and the mistakes of administrators.

Miller says incidents of various types are a fact of life in state hospitals, and not all of them can be prevented. But he believes a balance can

be reached between regimentation and anarchy, between "those who would have us put up a 10-foot chain link fence" and inadequate administrative controls.

It is apparent that he feels such a balance has not always been achieved at Stockton State Hospital. And he is particularly angered by reports that hospital administrators have ignored parent complaints or, even worse, failed to notify parents when their children are injured or seriously ill.

"When I first started to work for a hospital in the early 1950's," Miller recalls, "the rights of parents were not very well-defined, and if they were not happy with what was happening to their children, there was very little they could do about it."

"The times have changed, and parents have a lot more to say about what happens. Not everybody is with it yet. There has been bad management at Stockton and as a part of that there has been bad communication."