

The Sacramento Bee

Metropolitan News

Saturday, November 9, 1974

Page A3

Study Of Patient Funds Looms At Stockton Hospital

By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

The State Health Department is revising its procedures for handling money in patient trust accounts at Stockton State Hospital in the wake of parent complaints that some accounts are mismanaged.

It is not known what, if any, misuse of trust money has been uncovered by state investigators in the three-week-old probe of conditions at the hospital, but Health Department officials admit existing procedures may be inadequate.

Don Dooley, a spokesman for Health Department Deputy Director Don Miller, who is in charge of the investigation, said the department is "aware" of allegations that trust accounts have been improperly used at the hospital.

"We don't have any evidence to do a lot with," he said, "but we will be changing some procedures to tighten up and to ensure no misuse of funds."

Dooley said the procedures will require the approval of two employes, plus the resident/patient (when he or she is capable of giving approval), to remove money from trust accounts, and no more than \$10 will be kept on the ward for each resident at any one time. He said this procedure is already in effect on some wards and will be extended.

There are nearly 700 mentally retarded persons of all ages and varying degrees of retardation at the Stockton facility. Each resident has a trust account containing money from various sources—family, Social Security, parents' veterans benefits, for example. Amounts in the trust accounts are generally not large; by law, the state may use anything over \$500 to pay for resident care.

To remove money from the account for such items as soft drinks, candy bars, personal-hygiene items not provided by the hospital, or clothing, the resident often relies on a hospital employe who withdraws the money and in many cases makes the purchases.

State officials admit there is room for abuse in that system, but—as hospital trust officer Lois Westbrook put it—"I have to trust my employes."

Mrs. Westbrook refused to discuss individual trust accounts with a reporter, even with a parent present, but said she had nothing to hide and would welcome an investigation of the trust office. Asked if she would know if an employe were using resident money for other than the purpose stated by the employe, she said she would not.

"Some of the patients who are capable of doing so do their own purchasing," says Dooley. "Within this limited society where they live, we try to make them as self-reliant as possible. We have to strike a happy medium in procedure—it can't be too loose, but it shouldn't be too strict either. Eventually, you have to trust people."

Some parents say they were not initially told of the existence of trust accounts, although hospital officials say parents have always been welcome to inspect the monetary records of their children. Some parents say that when they question the records, they do not always receive adequate explanations for the disbursement of funds.

Several parents say they have been asked by the hospital to send money for their children when there is already money in the trust accounts. Others say they have purchased clothing or other items for their children, only to find it is lost not long after the purchases.

"When we first placed our son

there a year ago last August, we took him seven new sets of clothing and several pairs of shoes," says Donald Asbill of Manteca. "We went back a month later, and the clothing was all gone. We were told they were sent to the laundry and lost, and I asked, 'Even the shoes?' They had no response for that. Not too long after that, we were asked to send more money for clothing.

"We used to leave money on the ward for him, in amounts up to \$10, to buy things for him. It was about six weeks before anybody even told us about the trust accounts. Now I have no way of knowing how the money I left on the ward was spent."

Dooley says problems with lost clothing occurred when all laundry for Stockton was sent to Agnews State Hospital. Now, he says, only linen is sent to Agnews to be laundered and residents' personal clothing is on the wards at Stockton. He said \$35,000 was spent by the state at Stockton in the past year for replacement of lost clothing.

Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Hicks of Stockton, parents of a 35-year-old severely retarded woman who is deaf and cannot speak, have objected to

purchases made for their daughter on the ward where she resides.

"When we asked about her trust account, if there was something unaccounted for, we would be told by the trust officer that was handled on the ward," Hicks said. "Once when we asked for an accounting of her money, we found that expensive perfume had been purchased, supposedly for her. She can't talk or hear; she laughs, she cries, she feels emotion, but she has no recognition of things like expensive perfume."

Some parents suspect, but cannot prove, that employes are purchasing items ostensibly for the residents, and instead are using the purchases themselves. Or, even more serious allegations are made that employes have taken money from the trust accounts.

Marie White, a founder and organizer of the Concerned Citizens Action Committee, a parent and citizen organization formed to investigate the facility at Stockton, also was strongly critical of the way patient trust accounts are sometimes handled.

She described a type of misuse involving substitute receipts. "In other words, you draw some money

out of a trust account in behalf of someone for some purpose and use it for something else. We believe it continues to the present.

"We (the Citizens Action Committee) are very concerned about the residents who have no parents to look out for them, and we are in the process of setting up a non-profit corporation to oversee the affairs of those residents."

Dooley says the allegations are being thoroughly investigated as part of the state's total examination of conditions at the hospital. The investigation began three weeks ago after Mrs. Ronelia Templeton of Sacramento said her 6-year-old mentally retarded son, Michael McKibben, was severely beaten by another patient at the hospital. She and other parents, as well as the California State Employees Association, blame understaffing as a major reason for the incident.

State officials are withholding details of the investigation until it is completed, probably not until the end of this month. "The problem with the McKibben boy," says Dooley, "has led us into many other areas."