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Michael McKibben was photographed at left before he went to the Stockton State Hospital about a month and a half ago and above as his mother saw him Oct. 8, a day after she was told he had suffered a "slight fall." The boy's battered face was swollen, discolored.

Understaffing Blamed

Was Boy Beaten At Hospital?

By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

The mother of a mentally retarded child at Stockton State Hospital says her son was apparently beaten by another patient and may sustain permanent brain damage as a result.

She and some hospital employees blame understaffing.

A Sacramento physician who deals almost exclusively with mentally retarded children says it is the fourth such incident of apparent mistreatment or neglect of patients at the Stockton facility in the past year.

Mrs. Ronelia Templeton of Sacramento, mother of 6-year-old Michael McKibben, says the hospital called her Oct. 7 to tell her Michael "couldn't stand by himself and had taken a slight fall." She went directly to the hospital and found him with severe bruises and welts on his head and face.

"He was a mess," she said. "His eyes were almost totally swollen shut. His face was black and blue and swollen."

Dr. Donald Piper, a pediatric neurologist who is medical director at the Alta California Regional Center in Sacramento (where referrals of mentally retarded children are made to state and local facilities), said he examined the child last week and found brain damage which he feels resulted from blows to the head. "It wasn't a simple fall," he said.

The child is confined to a wheelchair, and it is not known whether the damage is permanent. He is being treated at San Joaquin County General Hospital near Stockton for a bacterial infection apparently unrelated to injuries suffered in the alleged beating.

Dr. Piper said three other incidents of apparent child neglect at the facility, which houses approximately 670 mentally retarded persons, have come to his attention within the past year: One involved an 8-year-old girl from Yuba City whose parents found her covered with sores and in diapers despite the fact she arrived at the fa-

cility toilet-trained; the second concerned a 7-year-old girl from Sacramento who was "covered all over her body" with impetigo sores; and an 8-year-old boy from Phoenix and Sacramento who had bruises on his buttocks "as if he'd been forced to sit on the toilet—the bruises followed that pattern."

After the first incident approximately one year ago, Piper said the hospital agreed to inform him whenever a child placed through Alta, which is state-financed and makes referrals for a 10-county area, experienced some kind of medical emergency. That, he said, has not been done, although it is routine in other hospitals.

A Bee reporter-photographer team which paid a surprise visit to the Stockton facility with Mrs. Templeton Thursday was allowed to tour the children's ward where Michael was allegedly beaten as well as another ward for children more seriously re-

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tarded than Michael and a section for retarded men.

The hospital administration would not allow the reporter to interview staff in the wards about the McKibben incident or any other alleged mistreatment of children. Nor would administrators answer questions about the incident or about staffing problems at the hospital.

Dr. John Freeman, medical director at the hospital, referred all questions about staffing to the State Department of Health, which oversees the state hospitals, and refused to answer questions about the McKibben incident.

He generally denied accusations that children are not always given prompt medical attention, noting that the children's ward has one fulltime physician. The physician is not, he added, a pediatrician—a fact of which Dr. Piper, parents and some staff members are critical.

The exact cause of Michael's injuries is difficult to determine. Several facts are known, however, mostly from confidential conversations with staff members who have worked with him.

Two psychiatric technicians, who asked not to be identified for fear of retaliation from hospital administrators, said Michael had been attacked on a previous occasion by an older boy who was reportedly upset because Michael had bumped into his nightstand. On that occasion, the technicians reported, the older boy had to be "pulled off" of Michael, but he was not removed from the ward.

One technician, contacted at home by telephone, said the most recent incident occurred at night, and a technician on duty reported hearing sounds of an altercation coming from the boys' ward the night Michael was injured, "but she was too busy to investigate."

Michael is, the technician added, prone to epileptic-type seizures—a fact confirmed by his mother—and it is possible that at least part of his injuries could have been caused by a fall during a seizure. But, the psychiatric technicians interviewed agreed that the severity of his injuries was not characteristic of a fall.

One technician with two decades experience in the field of mental retardation feels incidents such as the McKibben one could be avoided with proper staffing. For example, the technician said, only two persons are

generally on duty at night to watch over about 30 retarded, hyperactive and convulsive children in Michael's unit. Vacations and illnesses cause serious staffing problems beyond the usual shortages, the technician added.

"We're just able to do barely custodial care," the technician said, "and we can't be in 20 places at once."

Another technician, who has nearly 25 years experience in state hospitals and is familiar with Michael's case, said flatly that "we've almost had some children die before they are given medical attention" outside the hospital, which has an infirmary but no medical-surgical facilities. "Some of the kids get pretty ill, and we're supposed to try and treat them. This is supposed to approximate a home environment, and you certainly don't treat your own child who is seriously ill at home."

Many employes in the state hospital system say problems in the hospitals are directly related to the Reagan administration closures of state hospitals and to recent legislation emphasizing community treatment of mental illness and mental retardation.

A spokesman for the State Health Department said there were 13,290 mentally retarded persons in the state hospitals in 1967, shortly after the Reagan administration began, compared to 10,800 in 1971 and 10,050 today. The slack, presumably, is taken up by treatment in community-based facilities.

Health Department officials contend staffing in the state hospitals is approximately one staff person per two patients. According to state statistics, there are 362 staff persons for the 670 patients at Stockton—a ratio of more than 1 to 2.

But, the employes themselves add that those 362 employes are divided into shifts to cover the round-the-clock demands of state hospital care, often leaving a ward understaffed.

The California State Employees Association (CSEA) filed a grievance in July against the Stockton facility charging understaffing generally at the hospital, and specifically in the children's wards and the child development program of which Michael McKibben is a part. CSEA representative Rick Funderberg said the grievance was rejected by the state earlier this month.

Ronella Templeton and her hus-



Michael, in arms of his mother, Mrs. Ronella Templeton, yesterday, still showed effects of incident reported to her on Oct. 7.

Bee Photo

band, Larry, say they placed Michael in the state hospital because "we thought he would receive training that we couldn't give him at home." She said he benefitted considerably from a short-term training program at a state hospital in Iowa, where the family lived until last spring.

Professionals who have worked with Michael say he would benefit from proper training; some of them also say it is doubtful he will receive that training under current conditions in the state hospitals.

The Templetons could have the child placed in a community-based institution under Medi-Cal, but openings are limited.

"We've tried to handle this ourselves," Mrs. Templeton says, "but it's difficult. When he was in the state hospital in Iowa for five months, he learned to dress himself; he learned many things he couldn't learn at home. The winters in Iowa are very cold and the summers very humid, so we moved here for Michael's health. When we placed him in the state hospital, we had no idea of the problems here. We were shocked.

"I have no complaint about the staff in Stockton. The staff is great. They're just overworked."