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'I Was a Mental Patient at Kings County' Scared Children, Depraved Men Jammed in Wards

Reporter Reveals Overcrowding and Inadequate Staff

For months, the World-Telegram has received complaints from men and women who have been patients in the psychiatric division of Kings County Hospital.

The nature of the complaints was such that the World-Telegram decided to investigate conditions in the Brooklyn institution.

Without the knowledge of any one in the hospital or in the Department of Hospitals, staff writer Michael Mok was assigned to become a patient in the psychiatric wards of Kings County. He spent eight days in the locked wards. He was instructed to report his findings in a constructive effort to improve conditions. His series begins today.

By MICHAEL MOK,

World-Telegram Staff Writer.

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Despite the best efforts of its dedicated doctors and nurses, Kings County Hospital disgorges many of its mental patients with their minds scraped raw because its staff and facilities are inadequate for the processing of the mentally ill.

Personal inspection of the psychiatric division reveals:

Dreadful overcrowding—so bad that patients are forced to sleep in dining areas and hallways.

Lack of segregation — frightened children jockeyed in with depraved adults.

Improper housing arrangements — slightly depressed patients thrown in with raving lunatics.

Inadequate staffing—evidenced by overworked doctors, nurses, attendants and social workers.

Unsanitary conditions in the bathrooms of the wards.

Questionable psychiatric decisions — patients often sent off to state institutions or returned to society after only a few minutes of psychiatric examination.

Inadequate physical examination — patients not checked for venereal or other communicable diseases upon entering the hospital.

The most wretched condition of all stems from the lack of segregation in the wards. Children are locked in with depraved adults, dope addicts, alcoholics and violent mental cases. Senile men, youngsters in the depths of depression and ex-convicts share the same cramped quarters.

Some of the wards are so overcrowded they call to mind temporary infirmaries set up in London during the blitz. Some patients must sleep in dining areas, and cots are placed head to foot in hallways.

In one ward, 90 men—some of whom had lost control of their bodies—shared three toilets.

When patients bathe, wash or shave, the common practice is for them to dry themselves on bedsheets or pajamas, which are used by man after man until they are too wet to be of further use.

I make these statements on the basis of personal experience gathered while on assignment for the World-Telegram in the psychiatric division of Kings County Hospital. I spent eight days among the patients in two wards.

I was admitted to the hospital in as sane a condition as a man can enjoy in our modern world. I was discharged with the feeling that if I had been forced to remain another week, I would have been in danger of losing my mind.

In detailing this, I do not want to forget the little things: The acts of kindness and consideration shown me, or the petty day-to-day degradations of living in this city hospital psychiatric ward.

I remember how it felt to bend over the only drinking fountain in a ward for 60 patients. It was

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'Patient' Bares Conditions at Kings County

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broken and threw out only a dribble. Every time I drank I was acutely aware that it had been used by skid row derelicts—toothless men with racking coughs and wandering minds.

The chance of picking up a communicable disease from the fountain, or when drying on the same bed sheet with such unfortunate men, was heightened by the fact that the admission physical was limited to heart, pulse and blood pressure.

No check was made to see whether I had venereal disease, skin infection or even if I had a fever. I was amazed that certain diseases were not epidemic in the hospital.

On the positive side, I remember how a busy doctor took time out from his long day of overwork to assure my wife that I would be all right in the hospital, that she should not worry and that I would receive help.

There was a social worker who brought great comfort to the foreign-born because she had complete fluency in Spanish, Italian and French as well as English. No one's problem was too minor for her to heed, and she was our only legitimate contact with the outside world.

Worker Overworked.

If a man wanted to reach his family by telephone, it was this social worker's job to do it. If he said his wife was destitute and his children starving, it was her task to investigate and get them help.

But this self-sacrificing woman—whose evident ability, surely would have brought her greater financial reward elsewhere—was the only social worker for two wards I stayed in, which together housed about 150 men.

It was physically impossible for her to take care of all the detail, even if she worked on her own time and from, my observation of her, it seemed she did.

Because she was overworked, telephone calls which should have been made immediately had to be put off, families of patients were not notified when they should have been, and unnecessary anguish was caused in and out of the hospital.

Dope Addict Instructor.

Again on the dark side: I watched as two boys, about 13 and 14, sat on the floor of a filthy lavatory and listened open-mouthed to a dope addict who was explaining the best method for injecting heroin directly into the bloodstream.

The children shared the same quarters as ex-convicts who had done time in such places as Brooklyn's infamous Raymond St. jail, Rikers Island and Sing Sing.

The youngsters listened while these men told of the crimes which brought them to prison, and laughed dutifully while the ex-cons made obscene jokes about the hated cops.

Children also lived in close proximity to sick men who flew into senseless rages and had to be trussed up in straitjackets and hauled away gibbering. Although I saw no brutality, some of the attendants were contemptuous of the patients and rough with them.

Alcoholics Meet.

One of the most bizarre things I saw in Kings County involving the children was a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. A chapter of this organization descended on our ward on a Sunday morning to bring comfort to the drunks in our number.

I had no desire to listen, but it was either sit through the meeting or stand in the lavatory until it was over.

Apparently, it occurred to no one that the children were forced to listen to graphic, first-hand accounts of human degradation.

'Feel Myself Going.'

One 14-year-old boy confided to me that he thought he was losing his mind because of the things he had heard and seen during 20 days in Kings County.

"I can feel myself going," he said. "I just don't think I belong in here with all these big people. . . ."

But the most poignant remark of all was made by a young woman who came to see her father on visiting day. Tears were streaming down her face as she said:

"Papa, if I had known what it was like, I never would have sent you here."

TOMORROW:

Staff Writer Mok enters "G" Building and meets the other inmates.