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TEN CENTS

I Was a Mental Patient

Crowds Turn Visiting Hour Into Bedlam

After receiving many complaints about the Kings County Hospital psychiatric division, the World-Telegram assigned staff reporter Michael Mok to investigate. Without the knowledge of any authorities, he told a carefully prepared story of emotional difficulties and managed to win admission as a patient. He spent eight days there. Today he describes the difficulties of visiting patients there.

By MICHAEL MOK,

World-Telegram Staff Writer.

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Not all days have 24 hours. To the patient at Kings County a "day" is sometimes only 50 minutes long.

A visiting day at the psychiatric division of Kings County Hospital is officially 90 minutes long. But in practice, it often is shorter than that. The periods come at 2 p.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays.

Sunday is the busiest day because many people are unable to come to the hospital during the week.

On a typical Sunday in the wards, the children start clustering around the windows at about 12:30, hoping to catch sight of early comers. They don't care whose visitors they see—the sight of grownups carrying packages to the hospital is exciting to them.

Most of the visitors do have packages when they start trickling in to "C" Building about 1 p.m. These contain such items as cigarets, books, magazines, toothpaste, toothbrushes, food and candy.

Main Lobby Becomes Turmoil.

Inside the main lobby, which is furnished with heavy wooden benches, the visitors go to the information desk to get passes for the locked wards.

The visitors form two lines at the desk—one for those wishing to see male patients, the other female—and as visiting hour approaches these queues become serpentine which double back on themselves.

A single harried clerk tries to cope with each line, painstakingly checks her list to see if the patient in question is permitted visitors before finally issuing a pass.

After receiving their passes, many people sit on the benches—only to jump up again to go outside for a

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Visitors Stir Bedlam For Mental Patients

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cigaret. Smoking is not permitted inside the lobby, and cigaret butts pile up near the door as the visitors become more and more impatient and jumpy.

By 1:50 p.m. the lobby is a turmoil, and crowds are bunched up outside the locked elevators.

Worst Than Rush-Hour Subway.

At 2 p.m. the elevator doors slide open and the visitors struggle and jostle to win a place inside the car. Their in-fighting techniques make the Friday night rush hour on the subway seem like a Sunday school outing.

"Enough, enough, enough!" shrieks the desperate elevator operator, and the doors close. The car stops at the third floor and the men and women stream out.

They find themselves in a locked corridor. Some of the doors leading off the passageway have vision slots through which the visitors try to peer.

There is no staff member assigned to direct people to the appropriate wards, but in this matter the visitors are able to help each other. Someone always knows where all the wards are.

Two o'clock has come and gone and the restlessness in the corridor is almost unbearable. The time is now 2:10 p.m.

At 2:15, those closest to the vision slots are able to detect signs of motion behind the locked doors.

Long Delays, No Privacy.

The doors open and the visitors are required to form another line before a table, where two attendants go through their packages for such contraband as matches, writing materials, weapons and the like.

It is 2:20 p.m. Those visitors who are lucky, swift or perhaps even vicious, have gained the ward at last.

Others are not so fortunate. They are still fighting the battle of the lines and the passes and the elevators and the waiting.

A visitor who came to see me on Sunday spent 40 minutes of the 90-minute period just trying to get to the ward.

Once inside, the remaining minutes are not always pleasant. Visitors are permitted only in the day room, which is packed to capacity. They sit at the tables with the patients, inches away from other patients with other visitors. Privacy is impossible; intimacy is out of the question.

Conversations get mixed up, sandwiches brought from home are spilled, and there are always the watching attendants to remind visitors gruffly that smoking is forbidden, or if a man and wife should embrace, to say "Don't you know this is a HOSPITAL."

'Hour' Ends Too Quickly.

Contributing to the bedlam are those who have no visitors.

Most of these men and boys lounge in the lavatory or sit on the cold floor of the hall where visitors are not permitted during the hour. But some of them come out in the day room.

The visitors begins to realize that the patient he has come to see—who may be only nervous and depressed—is surrounded by men who are much sicker.

An old man sits at the table, crying . . .

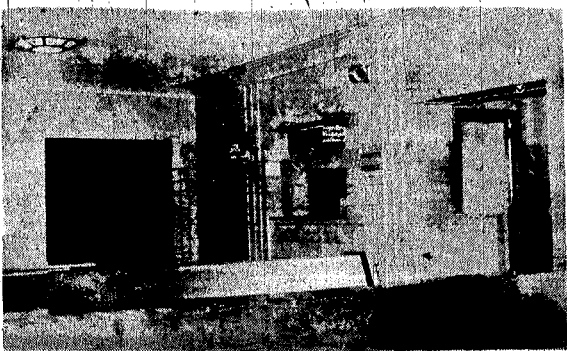
< A demented youth stands in the corner, muttering to the wall . . .

Children without visitors look at the strangers intently, as if hoping against hope that someone brought them something.

Time passes much too quickly. The visitors have barely seated themselves, it seems, when an attendant is bawling: "Visiting hour's over! Visiting hour's over!"

On the way out, a visitor may muse that while no one cares about getting him in on time, there's little danger of his overstaying his allotted time.

Many visitors leave "G" Building more shaken and upset than the patients they leave behind the locked doors.



On visiting days, this now deserted lobby of "G" Building is thronged with people. Those wishing to see male patients queue up at the left, female at the right. There are only two clerks to handle the rush.

Photo by Falumbo.

MONDAY: Transfer to tougher ward.

Staff writer Mok makes enough trouble to get into a tougher section.