



(TRIBUNE Staff Photo)

Woman patient wearing torn shirt held together at shoulder with pin lives at Melbourne Nursing Center, 4621 N. Racine Av.

## Cries for Help from Aged Answered with Brutality

(Photographs of neglected nursing home patients are on the back page.)

BY PAMELA ZEKMAN

The man and woman had been herded into the bathroom of the North Side nursing home and now they stood naked, facing each other in helpless humiliation.

Shivering and self-conscious, the two patients had responded almost mechanically to the orders to undress, barked by a nurse's aide.

"Goddamn it, hurry up. I have no time for you," the aide snapped when they hesitated a moment.

The woman stood silent, staring at the floor. Then in a final desperate effort to salvage some dignity from the incident, she clutched a thin sweater to her breasts and protested: "But he's not my boyfriend."

### All Dignity Is Destroyed

This is how they bathe the mentally disturbed at the Melbourne Nursing Center, 4621 N. Racine Av., where I worked for three days as a nurse's aide. Even the tiniest shred of human dignity is destroyed in this rat-infested fortress where 195 elderly and mentally disturbed patients are living.

During my stay at the home I witnessed many incidents of degrading and callous treatment.

I saw a woman patient grabbed like an animal and fed by an aide who slapped a cold meat patty into her mouth. The woman choked on her food and spat out the pills

tossed into her mouth as she was dragged to bed.

I heard cries for help met with a stream of ridicule and verbal abuse. Aides jokingly dubbed one man "Simple Simon." A woman begging for a blanket because she was sick and cold was told, "You smell like four Mississippi mules."

### New Clothes Locked Up

One aide confided to me that tho the patients wear rags, the owners keep a storehouse of clothing, donated by charity or purchased with allowances, locked up for use only during Health Department inspections. Then, in a grisly version of Cinderella, the patients are returned to their rags when the inspectors leave.

The home is owned and operated by Daniel A. Slader, treasurer of the Metropolitan Chicago Nursing Home Association.

Patient records are a shambles. On some of the eight-hour shifts, no entries are made in their medical records. I was told to fill in the "nurse's observations" at the beginning of my shift, a perilous game of predicting patient conditions hours ahead of time. Medication is handled in the same slipshod manner. I was instructed to throw one man's pills "down the drain," because he had a reputation for balking at his medicine.

My presence on the staff was testimony to the poor administration of a nursing home which receives thousands of dollars every month in welfare payments. After I answered a newspaper ad for nurse's aides, my phony

[Continued on page 2, col. 6]

# Cries for Help from Aged Answered with Brutality

[Continued from first page]

references and job history were accepted without question, apparently because I eagerly accepted a starting salary of \$1.70 an hour. I soon learned why they needed new employes.

The home is so overrun with vermin that at night employes have conceded large sections of the building to the rats. On the third floor, I was told, they barricade themselves in a small area while rats roam around the patients' living area.

But on this night the rats, cockroaches and "stench" of excrement were momentarily ignored as we frantically tried to bathe the patients in as short a time as possible.

As soon as the man and woman stepped from the bath and shower to face each other in a second embarrassing encounter, my supervisor handed me a dirty pillowcase.

## "We Don't Have Towels"

"Dry them off with this," she said. "We don't have any towels."

Still wet, the couple were ordered to get dressed. The man looked in disbelief at the pile of filthy garments and asked, "Put those back on?"

"I haven't got anything else to put you in," the aide retorted.

We bathed one other couple that night before the water turned cold, and used the same pillowcases in a futile effort to dry them.

"I'll have to tear up some sheets to finish the job," the aide finally conceded. She returned with two paper towels, designed for dusting and drying dishes, and we used them on the second couple.

The baths seemed an exercise in futility. The patients survive in squalor; packed together in overcrowded dingy, cheerless rooms in the dilapidated six-story building.

## Stench Is Overwhelming

The stench from urine, dirt, and decay is overwhelming. It permeates the building, becoming stronger as you move from the downstairs lobby to the second thru fifth floors, where patients are housed. In some cases they sleep six to a room. I frequently would find myself rushing from a room gagging with nausea from the intolerable smell.

The floors are caked with grime. Peeling paint is picked from the walls and eaten by hungry patients. During a leisure moment a rat scampered across my path.

"The rats play tag with each other here," an aide said. "The roaches run races."

One man is cursed and scolded for habitually dirtying his bed at night, while another is left lying in his own excrement.

"Oh, that ain't nothing to Harry," an aide said when I suggested that we change him. "He's used to it. I ain't going to change him."

A bedridden woman cries out in the night. "Help me. Help me. Oh my Gbd, help me."

She had knocked over a bed pan, drenching the sheets and her clothing.

The aide curses her clumsiness. "Goddamn you. You know better than that. You did it on purpose, damn it."

The sobbing woman moans. "I can't help it. You know I can't help it."

Patients get their exercise trudging up and down the stairs. Those who can't eat in the main dining room are herded into the floor's day room hours before the meals are served and are cursed if they dare leave.

"Go back and sit down," an aide yelled at an elderly emaciated woman who wandered into the hall.

"I've been sitting," she responded.

"Well go back and sit down again, damn you," the aide snapped.

Another woman tiptoed out, only to be told, "If you get up once more I'm going to break your head in," and later, "Get your damn - - - back in the day room."

The outside temperatures hovered near zero on the three nights I worked.

"Bring all the clothes you have for this shift," an aide warned me. "Sometimes it gets so cold in this place your teeth chatter."

Two rooms on the second floor, each housing four men, have no radiator. The patients have no blankets and are forced to huddle under a sheet or bedspread in an effort to keep warm. In one room sheets are stuffed in a window crack to keep out the cold.

A few lucky patients have nightgowns. The rest go to bed in their underwear or sleep in their clothing.

## Garments Are Makeshift

During the day their garments are even more pathetic. Pants are fastened with safety pins. Threadbare shirts have no buttons. Slips are two pieces of cloth knotted together at the shoulder. Dresses are frayed, and they tore apart in my hands when I attempted to take them off.

"All the new clothing is stored up on the sixth floor," an aide told me. It is brought down when the Board of Health comes and then all the patients look great. When the inspectors go, so do the clothes, right back up to the sixth floor."

On my last day at work I arrived and found the lobby flooded with water. The sewage pipes from all five floors had clogged and a water pipe had burst, I was told. A warning went out on all the floors not to drink or turn on the water because it was unsanitary. The ban lasted three hours.

"This is always going to happen in a place like this," a workman confided. "What they ought to do is tear down the building and start all over again."

His statement came only a day after a nurse's aide made this grim observation:

"I don't know how this place gets past the health department. They don't put any money in here. They just take it out. All I know is I wouldn't put my dog in this dump."