

**I Was a Mental Patient**

# **Frightened Youngsters Put In With Depraved**

Staff writer Michael Mok posed, without the knowledge of any authorities, as a patient in Kings County Hospital's psychiatric division for eight days. Today he concludes his report on shocking conditions there with recommendations for improvement.

**By MICHAEL MOK,**  
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

Official promises of ward-by-ward investigation of Kings County Hospital psychiatric division and other city mental institutions bring hope not only to former patients and their loved ones but to families now torn by mental illness.

Because many of these people face the possibility of having to rely on city institutions to help their families, they look to the committee headed by Dr. Lawrence C. Kolb, director of the New York Psychiatric Institute, to find ways of bettering some of the shocking conditions which now exist.

The worst of these at Kings County Hospital is the failure to segregate patients by age or illness.

The hospital therefore becomes a mortar in which are ground frightened children, depressed

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## I Was a Mental Patient

# All Ages Tossed Together in Wards

## Frightened Children Packed In With the Depraved

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youths and neurotic adults along with depraved ex-convicts, dope addicts, helplessly senile men and violent mental cases.

Next to the lack of segregation, the most appalling condition is overcrowding, which compels the hospital to bed down some patients in hallways and dining areas.

Crowding, too, contributes to the lack of segregation: Kings County has a separate ward for children, but this often is taxed beyond capacity, and the children spill-over into the adult wards.

Below are listed certain conditions which can be improved without great cost to anyone:

### Laundry.

The supply of towels is inadequate. I had the pleasure of using a towel just once during eight days in Kings County. The rest of the time I dried myself on sheets or old pajamas — which in many cases were passed from patient to patient. Pajamas, too, are scarce. I got one change of pajamas—our 24-hour-a-day costumes—during my stay.

### Smoking.

There is no cigaret ration for patients at Kings County. If inmates are lucky, they have visitors to bring them tobacco. Those who have no visitors have no ciga- rets.

At present, men who are confirmed smokers beg ciga- rets from other patients. And I soon learned that to give ciga- rets to all who asked meant to do without myself.

Other men picked up spit-soaked butt ends from the floor, or pleaded with smokers for a drag before they discarded their ciga- rets.

Again on tobacco: Kings County does not permit smoking in its day rooms. So men and boys jam lavatories and sit in passageways. These practices are dismal and unhealthy.

Another comfort denied patients without visitors is

the brushing of teeth. Either visitors bring toothbrush and toothpaste, or the patients do without.

### Books.

The hospital's library facilities are not exploited. Patients told me that from time to time a wagonload of books is wheeled into the wards. The wagon did not come during my eight-day stay.

Boredom was the order of the day. Both wards I saw had checker boards and playing cards. There were no other diversions.

### Sleep.

Beds are locked away during the day, and even patients who are mentally and physi- cally exhausted are not permitted access to them. Bone- weary men sleep on the cold floor.

One of the most pathetic scenes I witnessed in Kings County was an elderly Italian

pleading in broken English to be allowed to go to bed. He was told it was out of the question.

### Locker Space.

Locker space is not provided for patients. It was common to see a man wandering around all day carrying a shopping bag containing everything he owns.

At present, it is permissible to turn possessions over to the nurses' station for safe- keeping. This has the disadvantage of disturbing staff members who must continually interrupt their work to fish out various objects for patients or, as often hap- pens, to tell them to go away.

Each ward has a large closet suitable for the installation of lockers.

### Visitors.

Visitors were permitted for only 90 minutes three times weekly. Because the hospital has insufficient help to super- vise these periods effectively, snarls and delays develop. Visitors often spend 15 minutes or more of the precious time waiting anxiously in corridors.

Again as to visitors, when I was transferred from one ward to another, very few staff members were aware of the move. When my wife went to my old ward on the first visiting day after the transfer, it was almost 20 minutes before I could be tracked down.

### Discipline.

It was common practice to transfer patients to violent wards for breaches of disci- pline. All participants in a fight are usually sent to a violent ward—although one of the men involved may

have done no more than defend himself. Even such a minor offense as talking back to a nurse can result in transfer.

The punishment stems not from the violent ward itself, which is managed no more badly than any other, but from being confined with the most disturbed and dangerous men in the hospital.

Another unnecessarily depressing aspect of the hospital was that patients during my stay got very little fresh air. Although it has caged gymnastic areas, I was permitted outside only once in eight days.

Some of the unhappy conditions, I realize, can only be improved by allotting Kings County more money.

### Physical Examinations.

When I was admitted, my blood pressure, heart and pulse were checked. That was all. I was not examined for venereal diseases, skin ailments or other communicable illnesses. Other patients told me of the same cursory physicals.

### Psychological Tests.

Other patients told me of receiving batteries of psycho- logical tests. I was released without taking one.

### Doctors, Working Space.

Doctors interview patients in grimy, cluttered cubicles which have a depressing effect on everyone.

That Kings County needs more doctors is attested to by patients continually complain- ing of being unable to see their psychiatrists. One boy told me 20 days had gone by since his last interview.

Another depressing feature was the hospital's need of paint. The rooms and corridors

with blistered and peeling paint were extremely depressing.

My final observation is on the bright side:

I recommend that the hos- pital's dietitians be given the raise. The food was consist- ently varied, well chosen and tasty.

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