

Service to Mental Hospitals

In the present acute shortage of hospital help, mental hospitals have suffered even more severely than hospitals for the physically ill. In the best of times, most people put such establishments out of their minds with a shudder, although the public has been reminded over and over again that statistically one person out of twenty in this country will at some time in life be under institutional care for mental illness. The war intensified the difficulties of the mental hospitals by adding attendant shortage to the chronic problems of steady increase in patients and consequent overcrowding.

From coast to coast the situation is the same. In New York City, Mayor La Guardia appeals on the radio for more attendants in the Bellevue Psychiatric Division. In a report on state mental hospitals in California for May 1945, phrases like this are frequent: "We are at a loss to know what to do with patients who come in. . . . Our nursing problem very difficult. . . ."

The Philadelphia State Hospital at Byberry, Pa., is fairly typical of other mental institutions the country over in its shortage of personnel. But, for the past two years, Philadelphia State Hospital has been the scene of an endeavor that shines like a light in the general gloom. The story begins with a group of young women who faced the problem squarely and started to do something about it.

The hospital has a capacity of 3,587, according to the standards set by the Pennsylvania Department of Welfare. At the present time it cares for 6,200 patients. According to the American Psychiatric Ratio, there should be 879 attendants for this number of patients. The hospital never has been able to meet that standard. Before the war it had 486 attendants. Wartime conditions reduced the number to 143. Of these, 65 are men, 78 women. In the men's division, a Civilian Public Service Unit (conscientious objectors), not paid and not listed, actually doubles the number of male attendants, though even this leaves the division understaffed. On the women's side the situation was even more critical.

Taking into account the number of attendants who for one reason or another are not on duty, the average number on the wards for each twenty-four hour day

is reduced to 54. These 54, who care for 3,387 mentally ill women, must be spread over three shifts, or "tours." On the 2 to 11 p. m. tour, the average is one attendant to 211.5 patients. In one ward of over 250 ambulatory patients there are never more than two attendants at a time. Frequently attendants work "doubles," adding five or six hours to their regular nine hours of duty.

If it were not for the worker-patients, who help dress the less capable patients, make beds, clean, and run errands, the institution could scarcely continue to function; but though "workers" these are still patients, subject to disturbed periods, requiring direction, understanding, and care.

The Opportunity

To help meet this need, the American Friends Service Committee two years ago opened a women's unit in the Philadelphia State Hospital. Eight young women, three of them wives of CPS men, made up the first group. The unit has continued without interruption since that time, fluctuating in number from six to forty. A second unit, for the three summer months, was opened on June 15, 1945, in the New Jersey State Hospital at Trenton.

Similar women's units in mental hospitals where CPS men are also working were developed in 1944 by the Mennonite Central Committee and the Brethren Service Committee. These organizations, like the American Friends Service Committee, are responsible for CPS camps under selective service. They have been concerned not only to meet an extreme need, but also to provide a way in which young women who are conscientious objectors to war may perform public service in wartime.

The Mennonite Central Committee had summer units in 1945 at the Ypsilanti, Kalamazoo, Wernersville, Hudson River, and Cleveland State Hospitals.

At the Elgin State Hospital at Elgin, Ill., a women's service unit was opened in 1944 by the Brethren Service Committee as part of a "year of volunteer service project." The young women live in a cooperative house furnished by the Brethren Service Committee, and the volunteers contribute all earnings above simple maintenance to other projects.

Members of the units sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee at the Philadelphia State Hospital live in the women attendants' home and eat in the cafeteria where all the attendants, including the CPS men, have their meals. They are paid the regular attendants' salary of \$70 a month plus full maintenance and laundry.

They work approximately 51 hours a week. One evening each week, together with the CPS men, they have a unit meeting for the pooling of problems, discussion, or recreation. Frequently they have an outside speaker. Among the speakers have been Sarah Cleghorn, the Vermont poet; Rufus M. Jones, the Quaker writer; Arthur Morgan of Antioch College; Horace Alexander, author of "India Since Cripps."

A training course of sixty hours is given all new attendants. It occupies an hour a day over a period of weeks, so that the learning goes on simultaneously with the work. In the first part of the course, nurses of the hospital staff demonstrate simple nursing techniques, bed-bathing, charting, ward housekeeping, and general care of the mentally ill. In the second part, doctors and nurses lecture on the varieties of mental illness and the care of patients suffering from each type of disorder.

The director of nurses in the hospital, Helen Edgar, is also the director of the unit. The girls select one of their own number as assistant unit director and appoint a personnel committee. A member of the staff of the American Friends Service Committee acts as liaison between the hospital and the girls, safeguards their health, and handles applications and admissions.

Who They Are

All members of the unit are college women. Many of the summer group, which represented twenty-one states and thirty colleges and universities, were undergraduates on vacation. Their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-four, although as a general rule twenty is considered the minimum age. Two of the group last winter were Antioch College students fulfilling their work requirements. Others have been teachers, secretaries, research workers, psychiatric aides, nurses, occupational therapists. Most of them are sociology or psychology majors.

with pre-medical students the third largest group, but majors have included music, art, languages, education, philosophy, and literature.

Not every girl who applies is accepted. All members of the unit must, of course, be physically and mentally healthy—strong enough for arduous work. They must have seriousness of purpose, and the desire to help where help is urgently needed.

A visitor to the unit is struck immediately by two things: the vitality of these young women, and their purposeful and entirely unsentimental attitude toward their work. "I have never approved of that sort of charity which is showy and given in bursts," wrote one on her application. They do not dramatize themselves.

The work is the regular daily care of mental patients. There are wards for incontinent, senile patients, over-active patients; there are the worker-patients, and the infirmary for those who are physically ill. The general routine is much the same, however, and includes getting the patients bathed and dressed, serving their meals, feeding those who are unable to feed themselves, toileting them, directing them to the yard or day-room, preventing fights, accidents, and runaways, keeping the wards neat, changing linen, writing up charts, dealing promptly with emergencies as they arise

getting the patients undressed and in bed again. The over-active and the incontinent add their own special difficulties.

It is a hard routine, often gruelling, physically and emotionally. Always there are the smells, the irrational laughter, the yells, the wild singing. "You have to recondition your sense of smell and your sense of hearing," said one young woman cheerfully, "so that you don't notice smells and hear only the unusual noise."

The Effect on the Girls

The need to be watchful and alert every moment imposes a strain. Frustration caused by the inability to do for the patients all that one would like to do, the weariness that comes with working alone at too big a job, the constant sight of tragedy, all weigh on the spirit. The lack of understanding of mental illness on the part of some of the older attendants and the violations of the principles of good psychiatric practice arouse pity for the patients.

To walk the narrow line between chill impersonality and the stimulation of too warm a response requires careful balance. However it might seem to the outsider, the attendant whose departure leaves a whole ward despondent and grieving is not considered a success by the hospital. The unsocial reactions of some of the patients are also disconcerting. It is easy enough to be amused when a very de-

teriorated patient says condescendingly, "Call *me* if you need any help, *you* wouldn't know a bee from a bull's eye." Profane or obscene abuse can be shrugged off. But it is more difficult to remain serene when a disturbed patient forcibly snatches the keys of the ward.

The morale of the new member is apt to reach a low point at the end of two months; after that is weathered, the work becomes more rewarding. In spite of the discouragements and difficulties however, very few of the girls have left because they could not "take it" any longer. The average length of stay has been five months, and when they leave it is to return to their regular work or to enter on other paths which this experience has pointed out to them.

Most of the young women have considered their work in the mental hospital valuable to them quite apart from the satisfaction that comes from rendering a much needed service.

Those who are going to be nurses, teachers, psychologists, social workers, or occupational therapists, feel they will bring to their vocations an understanding that they could not have acquired so quickly in other ways. "The mentally ill should really be called the emotionally ill," said the young assistant director of the unit at Philadelphia State Hospital. "Working with them you learn about the emotions of other people, and how to



Without enough attendants to carry on activities with patients, sitting in the ward's drab day room is called recreation

Photos courtesy of American Friends Service Committee



A unit member gives simple nursing care



Small attentions can make patients happy

handle yourself in the face of those emotions." Another girl said, "No classroom study could show me as well what unhappy people are like and how they may be helped."

It has been, besides, a maturing process for the members of the unit. They are quick to see and frank to admit the effect of this experience upon their own development. "You learn to interpret your own emotion to yourself," said one girl, "when you see it displayed in others in an exaggerated form." And another: "It makes for honesty with oneself and with others. Any insincerity is recognized at once by the patient."

Through the work of the units a pressing need is being met. Small as the units are and vast as the need is, if these girls were not working in these hospitals, there would be no one to take their places. Although the crowding and the shortage of personnel have made the care that they can give largely custodial, nevertheless they have handled hundreds of troubled people with intelligence, understanding, and gentleness. At Trenton, where the hospital is smaller and more adequately staffed than the Philadelphia State Hospital, an active program of therapy reaches almost every patient, and the members of the unit can give more individual attention to the patients.

Also, the unit has been able to relieve the drab monotony of the worker-patients' lives. At one time volunteers among them gave up one evening a week to occupational and recreational therapy for the

worker-patients, who otherwise had nothing to vary their dull round of menial work. But that was found to be too heavy an addition to the girls' already full schedule and it has lapsed. Instead members of the unit have taken games and crafts materials to the wards and contrived time to give the worker-patients some help with these interests. A visitor going through the wards recently was impressed by the eager affection with which worker-patients in one building after another greeted the member of the unit who accompanied her.

In indirect ways, also, the units have



Preparing hydrotherapy treatment

contributed much. The very entrance of a number of attractive, intelligent, and devoted young women into an overburdened and isolated group is in itself stimulating and revitalizing. The units have consistently used with the patients the methods of the best psychiatric practice—kindness, firmness, cheerfulness, and consideration for the individual.

Their work, in conjunction with that of the CPS men, has resulted in enlargement of the training course and a dignifying of the attendant's position. Some of the members have contributed to *The Attendant*, published by the Mental Hygiene Program of Civilian Public Service, the first periodical devoted to the problems and methods of attendant care.

One of the most far-reaching results of this work cannot yet be assessed—its effect on the layman's attitude toward mental illness. One of the reasons why state institutions cannot do more for the mentally ill, given modern scientific knowledge, is that the public has never faced the problem squarely. Until the average taxpayer—the businessman, the housewife, the teacher, the factory worker—realizes that public funds must provide modern buildings, doctors, equipment, and trained and adequately paid attendants for these hospitals, the mentally ill will continue to be thrust out of sight, neglected, and forgotten. The members of the women's units, going back to their communities scattered over the country, will sow and cultivate the seed of understanding and purpose.