

Major Overhaul Suggested For Mental Health System

By VINCENT THOMAS
Assemblyman, 68th District

A sweeping overhaul of California's entire mental health treatment system, including extensive revision of laws and court procedures for commitment of persons to state hospitals, is called for in a recently released report by the Assembly Subcommittee on Mental Health Services.

The report also points out the need for changes in public attitudes toward the mentally ill, saying that in many cases these erroneous concepts and conflicting goals have caused needless commitments, have resulted in worsening rather than improving patients' mental health, and have boosted costs to the taxpayers without corresponding benefits.

California's basic dilemma, the report says, is that under the present system the courts and the hospitals are forced to choose between two objectives, individual health and public safety. Or to put it another way, between treatment and civil liberties, or between medical and legal considerations. Regardless of which objective or approach is favored in a particular situation, the result tends to be that the patient is committed into long-term custodial care, treatment is negligible and his chances for recovery and return to society are rather poor.

HERE ARE some interesting and thought-provoking excerpts from the Assembly committee report, cited as background for its recommendations:

Of the 16,322 admissions to California state hospitals in 1955, 13,534 were involuntary, amounting to 83 per cent. Ten years later, in 1965, there were 22,189 admissions, of which 13,612 were involuntary, or 61 per cent. The rate of admission per 100,000 population in 1955 was 130; in 1965 it was 141. Last year, there were more than 40,000 psychiatric patients in California institutions, public and private.

There are no precise definitions, diagnoses or treatments of mental illness—it's still mostly trial and error or one more or less qualified person's opinion against another's.

THERE ARE almost as many types and degrees of mental illness as there are of other illnesses: No competent doctor would prescribe the same treatment for pneumonia as for heart disease, yet most mental patients receive the same treatment.

Three Marine Reserve second lieutenants from Torrance were among the 594 new Marine Corps officers graduated from the 41st Officer Candidate Course at the Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Va. The new officers are Jerome L. Lemberger, son of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Lemberger, 4103 W. Artesia Blvd.; Robert M. Flick, son of Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Flick, 4710 Reese Road; and Robin R. Bowen, son of Mr. and Mrs. Ross H. Bowen, 3650 Newton St.

Engineman Fireman Mike E. Leischner, USN, son of Mrs. G. B. Thompson of 21111 Dolores St., is attending the basic Engineman School at the Service School Command, Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, Ill.

may be their particular trouble, receive the same kind of treatment, if any.

Only about one-fourth of all mentally ill are dangerous or potentially dangerous to themselves or to others, yet the public tends to regard all mental patients in these terms. This has resulted in

over-emphasis of the "prison" aspect of mental hospitals to the detriment of rehabilitation.

Being sent away from a familiar, friendly environment to the impersonal, dreary atmosphere of a distant mental hospital can and does result in making the pa-

tient's condition worse in all too frequent cases.

MENTAL HOSPITALS, for a variety of reasons, tend to settle into a routine of providing board and room, keeping patients clean and orderly, at the expense of seeking more aggressively to diagnose and treat patients so that

they may return home safely and quickly.

Many people, particularly the elderly and the poor, are just "dumped" into state hospitals, whether they are really mentally ill or not, because their families or society in general don't want to be bothered with them.

services be made available to those seeking help on a voluntary basis — counseling, employment, housing, welfare, recreation, clinical, etc.—and it calls for conversion of state hospitals into high quality, open hospitals providing better staffing, more enlightened policies and individualized treatment.

The report suggests that the changes it recommends need not be extremely costly, but rather that moderniza-

tion in the long run would cost far less than at present. These ideas deserve careful review by the entire state government structure.

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