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Minnesota Bedlam

Patients Fed 8-Cent Meals

This is the fifth of a series of stories describing conditions in Minnesota mental hospitals. Geri Hoffner, Tribune writer, and Arthur Hager, Tribune photographer, visited all of the seven state hospitals.

By Geri Hoffner, Minneapolis Tribune Staff Writer

Eating at Minnesota's seven hospitals cannot be considered one of life's pleasures.

We sampled both patient and employee meals. In most of the hospitals, the employee eats considerably better than the man or woman who is mentally sick. But the employee's food seldom is tasty or pleasing.

What the patient eats – with the exception of the meals served at one hospital – is not only unappetizing but monotonous.

25 Cents A Day

How well can you feed a person on approximately 25 cents a day? That's all the state hospitals can spend for each patient's three daily meals. In addition:

- Lack of equipment means food which should be hot gets to the patient cold;
- Bread placed on tables hours before meals gets stale and tasteless;
- No dieticians to plan meals means too much starchy food and badly balanced diets.

We walked into a dining room on a ward where men patients, mainly farm workers, were lunching on boiled potatoes, beans with a dash of pork, gravy and lumpy chocolate pudding.

As in most hospitals, they were eating from bowl-like tin cups without handles.

We saw lunch at another hospital: huge helpings of sauerkraut, boiled potatoes, and thin stew. In several hospitals we saw no butter.

We never saw lettuce, tomatoes, celery, carrots, or cabbage. We did not see pie or cake served once, although we were told pastry is baked in hospital kitchens.

Cheerless Room

We saw a ward dining room where the food was on the tables at least 15 minutes before the patients came in to eat. It was a women's ward, but there were no tablecloths or napkins on the dark wood tables and the room was dark and cheerless.

At one institution, the only silverware given to the patient was a tablespoon. At the same hospital, we were told patients are given ice cream on Christmas and the Fourth of July. Desserts ordinarily are stewed fruits.

At another hospital, one of the dining rooms also must serve as a recreation room and a bedroom for about eight patients.

Superintendents lamented the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables. Vegetables raised on hospital farms are not sufficient and the limited supply of fresh fruit available to the hospitals is from the federal school lunch program.

Inasmuch as the farms produce a large percentage of the hospitals' meat, vegetables, and milk, we asked what provisions have been made in case of a bad year.

Try To Manage

An official with the state division of institutions said the governor could use his calamity fund. But several superintendents merely shrugged and said: "We'd get along as best we could. We've had enough experience at doing just that."

One danger in attempting to run a hospital with no dietician is that special diets for diabetic, aged, surgical, and other patients never can be exact.

At one state hospital, the superintendent admitted that all diabetics are served the same diet with no allowance for varying individual requirements.

"Medically this cannot be justified," he added. "To get the best results for diabetics, there must be a constant juggling of diet and insulin. We give them all the same diet and then give them more insulin than they probably need. "

"We don't even attempt the proper dietary management of patients with other diseases where diet is important."

Kitchens Checked

We looked into the kitchen of every institution we visited and here is what we found:

- Two hospitals still use coal-burning stoves which turn the kitchens into infernos during the summer months;
- No hospital has equipment for frying, broiling, or roasting of food for its patients;
- Most hospitals have no electric toasters and several have no electric bread slicers;
- Few hospitals have electric dishwashers and those we saw were very small.

Several hospitals have electrically-heated food carts but not one has a sufficient number. Some hospitals still are using ice boxes and several others need more refrigerators and frozen food lockers.

At one hospital, because each ward is built on a different level, food carts would not be practical. But the dumbwaiter we saw used to lift food from the basement to upper floors was nothing more than an over-sized packing crate operated by human muscle-power.

As we watched it being lifted, a cockroach crawled over the top and down the side.

A number of suggestions have been made to improve the food and the food service in the state hospitals. The following were made by the Rev. Arthur Foote, chairman of the Minnesota Unitarian conference's committee on mental institutions:

- Dieticians must be hired although the present civil service salary range of \$167 to \$248 a month probably will have to be increased.
- A study should be made to determine how much and in what respects present diets are deficient. This study should include an examination of the relationship of an inadequate diet to mental illness, particularly to senility.
- Proper equipment which will allow the serving of a varied and hot diet should be purchased as soon as possible.
- And, of primary importance, the food should be appetizingly cooked and attractively served. In some of the better mental institutions in other states, cafeteria-style serving has been tried successfully.

Mentally-ill persons still are capable of tasting and smelling and appreciating good food. Tablecloths, napkins, a vase of flowers from the institutions' greenhouses and colorful plastic dishes would help create an atmosphere of pleasant normalcy.

And surroundings are a major factor in helping the sick mind to find itself.

Wednesday: Use of restraints in Minnesota's seven hospitals.

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Picture Story

Mental Hospitals Offer Monotonous Food

Good food, attractively served rarely is found at any of Minnesota's seven mental hospitals. There is not enough equipment and the approximately 25 cents a day allowed for each patient's meals does not permit much leeway in planning. Not one hospital has a dietician to see that patients get properly balanced diets. Paper napkins and table cloths seldom are used to help make the atmosphere pleasant.



Ancient coal burning ranges are used in the Anoka state hospital. The only time fires are permitted to go out is when the grates must be replaced. Heat from the ranges became almost unbearable for kitchen employees during the summer. Left, an employee is shown in the hospital kitchen.



Usually there are no funds for the repairs. The charred black ceiling in the picture left was caused by heat from the steam kettles when the exhaust system got out of control. Most of the hospital food is cooked in these big kettles. At right is a typical institution meal, served in tin plates and pans. The meal consists of bread, already buttered; with a few small pieces of pork, potatoes, string beans and milk. Tin pans serve as “cups” for the milk and each patient is provided with a tablespoon with which to eat.



There are no dumbwaiters to carry food to upper floors at the institution, so patients—usually elderly women like the one pictured—must make numerous trips up two and three flights of stairs at every meal.

At right is a dumbwaiter made of an old packing crate and operated by human muscle-power. Food is placed on the shelves and hauled to the upper floors of this hospital after it is brought from a nearby kitchen through dusty tunnels.

