

## PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

### THE INSTITUTION'S ROLE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION \*

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EFFORTS to inform and interest the public about mental deficiency have been discouraging in the past because of indifference and ignorance on the part of the general public. However, people now are recognizing more generally that mental deficiency is one of the handicaps to which humans are subject and that it is not a disgrace nor a matter of shame. This change in public attitude is due to the patient efforts by professional workers in the field over the years, combined recently with the splendid educational programs conducted by enthusiastic groups of parents and friends of the mentally retarded. In Minnesota we are fortunate to have such groups organized under excellent leaders co-operating closely with professional workers at the County, State and institutional levels. As an evidence of their active interest in our employees, the Minneapolis Chapter gave a tea in their honor in our Assembly Hall on a Saturday afternoon last October. More than 25 Association Members from the Twin Cities assisted by those from other communities served as a reception committee. It was a beautiful function—an occasion that will long be remem-

bered by all of those of our over 600 employees who attended. Our Governor, C. Elmer Anderson, and his wife were honor guests. They were noticeably impressed by this fine gesture. The Governor declared his intention to give full support to the entire program for the mentally deficient and expressed his genuine appreciation for the services our employees are rendering in the performance of their duties. Mr. R. T. Lindh, President of the State Society for the Mentally Retarded, explained that the occasion was intended to express the gratitude and appreciation of the parents and friends for the work being done for the patients in the institution by all employees. His words made a profound impression because every one knew of the valuable, devoted, and unselfish services he has rendered on behalf of the mentally retarded and especially so for those in our institution.

Because of a long waiting list, the 1945 Legislature authorized the use of the State Public School at Owatonna, which no longer was needed for dependent and neglected children, to be used for mentally defective children believed capable of becoming self-supporting. The name was changed to the Owatonna State School, whose superintendent is Cuyler M. Henderson, one of our

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fine members. The legislature also authorized the use for mental defectives of a dormitory in the St. Cloud Reformatory to be known as the Annex for Defective Delinquents. The purpose of this legislation was to provide space at Faribault for patients in urgent need of institutional care. To accomplish this, in July 1945, we transferred our entire academic school group of over 200 children to Owatonna and over 60 chronic defective males to St. Cloud. In their place we accepted about 100 patients from the waiting list. An additional 800 have since been admitted to space provided in 7 new dormitories, increasing the total patient population to 3,200. It has become necessary for us to materially change our program to meet the needs of the relatively greater number of custodial patients now being admitted. Many of them have been very young children and among these a large number of very helpless patients or those very hyperactive. A higher ratio of employees is required because of the increased nursing care and supervision necessary. Fortunately, in 1949 the State Legislature with the hearty approval of the citizens passed the Mental Health Policy Act sponsored by former Governor Luther W. Youngdahl. This Act establishes high standards for the diagnosis, care, and treatment of mentally deficient and mentally ill persons. To carry out provisions of the Act, increased appropriations were made to augment the number of employees in the various existing services and to authorize many essential new positions. These included for our institution a clinical director, additional medical con-

sultants, a clinical psychologist and staff, a full time resident Chaplain, a staff of recreational workers, a personnel officer, a patients' program supervisor and a graduate nurse as director of in-service training. A forty-hour work week for employees was established, with increased rates of pay and provision for automatic cost-of-living adjustments. Substantial increases were made in the appropriations for better clothing and food for patients with improvements in the facilities for preparing, distributing, and serving foods. The Act provides also for a single standard of food for patients and employees alike.

We believe it is our duty as well as privilege at every opportunity to inform the public of the improvements in patient care and treatment which have resulted from the liberal increased appropriations by the 1949 and 1951 Legislatures. For this purpose a public education officer for the institution was appointed in accordance with the plan of Dr. Ralph Rossen, the Commissioner of Mental Health. He installed a system for public education programs so that each of the nine institutions in the group of mental hospitals, including the Minnesota School and Colony should be community-linked educational centers. An educational officer in each institution acts under this plan for the purpose of stimulating the use of all available mental health educational services and materials; co-ordinates the activities of staff members in consultative services to educational and social agencies and study group programs; and acts as the representative in each institution to maintain contact with the office

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of the Commissioner of Mental Health in regard to public education.

I was interested to read how the Board for Texas State Hospitals and Schools has enlisted state newspapers to keep the public informed of the needs and developments in the efforts to improve the treatment and care of patients in state institutions. Dr. George W. Jackson, in the 1950-51 Report of the Board stated: "The press has shown a marked interest and the newspapers have given a considerable amount of space to the progress and needs of state institutions." (1)

We have enjoyed the friendly interest which the local press and radio station have taken in the institution and the excellent publicity they have given at all times. We have also been fortunate that Mr. Cedric Adams, prominent Minneapolis newspaper columnist and radio commentator, became interested in our patients through his friendship with Mr. Lindh. He has made ardent appeals at Christmas time through his column, "In this Corner" and in his radio broadcasts. The response has been beyond all expectations. Gifts poured in like magic and sufficient money given to purchase nineteen television sets, a portable 16 mm. movie projector with sound track and screen, and a portable organ. During the year, Mr. Adams brought his troupe of radio entertainers to the school to present an evening performance for our patients and employees. It was a real fun fest for all.

We entered a candidate in each of the two annual contests of the National Association for Mental Health to select the Outstanding Aide for the mentally

retarded. The purpose of these contests is to honor Outstanding Aides and to inform the public of the essential services they perform. In each contest, we were proud to have our candidate selected for one of the honorary awards. Presentations were made at public meetings and proper recognition given to the winners. The presentation of the award to our winner in last year's contest was made in connection with the dedication of a new dormitory last January. The Governor made a very fitting presentation before a large group of citizens, members of the Legislature, state officials and employees. Very fine publicity resulted.

Last Christmas we were invited by the local radio station to participate in a broadcast of Christmas music given by the local church choirs. This series of broadcasts attracted a great deal of interest in the community. Our children were thrilled to be included and made a most creditable contribution.

We welcome visits by parents of mentally defective children who desire information to help them make plans for a child whose needs cannot be satisfactorily met in the home, especially if institutional care is being considered. I know of no greater service in public education that an institution can render than this, not only for the good of the defective child but also for the emotional and often physical well-being of the other members of such a family. In addition to giving sufficient time for a full discussion of the problem and to answer questions, a visit to the building where the child would live if admitted to the institution is desirable. Dr. S. L.

Sheimo concludes an article in our JOURNAL on "Problems in Helping Parents of Mentally Defective and Handicapped Children" with this statement: "It seems important to the author not to underestimate the intense repressed forces which become mobilized in parents who have mentally defective and/or handicapped children. At such times, to center one's attention on the defective child rather than toward the parental conflict, might be attempting to deal with the least relevant factor in the total situation." (2)

Institutions should also contribute to public education by mutual co-operation with workers in other fields of mental deficiency because of their interdependence. Some members of our staff met in June 1943 as members of a committee with Miss Mildred Thomson, one of our Past-Presidents, and Head of the Bureau for Mentally Deficient and Epileptic, in our state Division of Public Institutions, who acted as Chairman. The committee collaborated in preparing the booklet, "Teach Me" which was published in June 1945 by the Division of Public Institutions to serve as a guide for parents and others who have the care of subnormal children. It must have filled a great need as over 80,000 copies have been printed and even now scarcely a day passes without requests for copies being received from our own and other states.

For the past four years, members of our staff have participated in an Institute on Mental Deficiency which the University of Minnesota, in co-operation with the State Division of Public Insti-

tutions, has presented annually at the Center for Continuation Study on the University Campus. In the past, registrations have been limited to professional workers in the various fields of mental deficiency. However, this year parents were invited to attend sessions on the first day and a half of the three day meeting. Several parents gave excellent talks and many parents entered actively into the discussions following the various papers presented. Everyone agreed that the Institute served a greater purpose in education even for the professional workers because of the presence of the parents this year.

All over our land, the public is awakening to the needs of the mentally handicapped among us. At long last, the barriers that had been erected because of ignorance, indifference, or stigma are being broken down and human dignity recognized. Institutional workers who are fortunate to live where adequate funds and facilities are being provided, have a great responsibility to institute improved programs for education, treatment and care and to spread the good word for the better and happier life made possible. Anna T. Scruggs, Superintendent of the Enid (Oklahoma) State School, a member of our Association for whom we have a high regard, writes in the April, 1952 issue of Mental Health (3) "The Superintendent who takes advantage of every opportunity to bring the school's activities out in to the public eye will find his efforts repaid in new interest in the institution." She contrasts the situation today with that

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of ten years ago when the school did not have a place in the community except in a physical sense and was isolated because it had little to show the public. Though visitors were invited, they were actually not welcome. Through the provisions for modern methods of treatment, she says, "Now we can open our doors to the public and say, proudly, 'This is what we are accomplishing.'" May we all be able to

join in her closing words: "We have come out of the shadows into our rightful place in the sun."

## REFERENCES

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2. S. L. SHEIMO, M.D. "Helping Parents of Mentally Defective Children." *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, July, 1951.
3. ANNA T. SCRUGGS, Superintendent. "Superintendents Discuss Aspects of School Administration." *Mental Hospitals*, April, 1952.