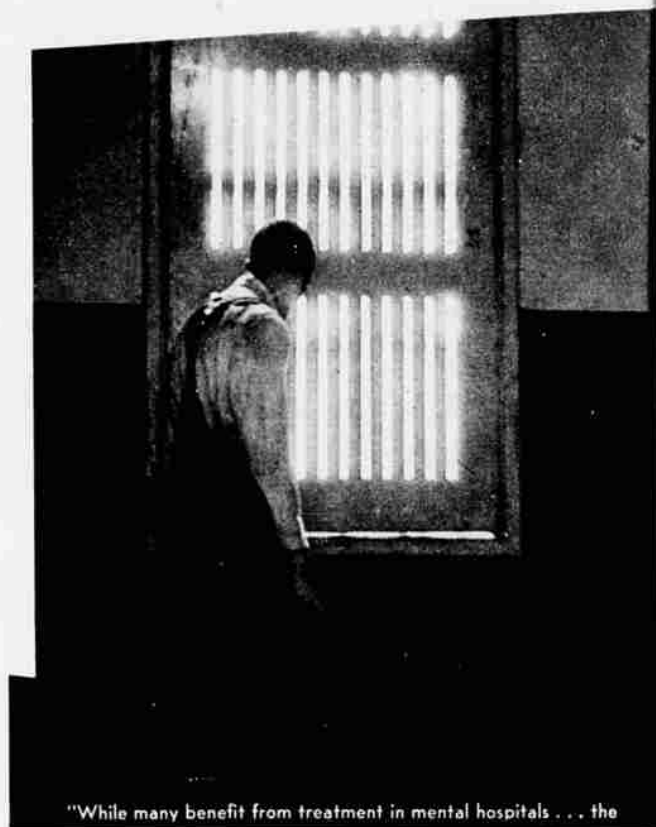


The Shame of Our Mental Hospitals

In spite of sporadic campaigns, the nation's No. 1 health problem still gets pitiful treatment; here's what could be done.



"While many benefit from treatment in mental hospitals . . . the

The author has been a persistent crusader for better treatment of mental illness.

A series of his articles that spotlighted the shortcomings of California mental institutions resulted in a \$250 million mental-hospital modernization program in that state and won for Ostrow the international Lasker Award in 1948.



He also received a "Christian journalism" gold medal from the Catholic Newsmen's Association for a successful campaign to change state laws to permit California county hospitals to establish mental-treatment clinics.

Later, in Ohio, Ostrow worked incognito as a ward attendant at Cleveland State Hospital to get first-hand facts for an exposé of unsatisfactory conditions there. This caused a dramatic improvement in patient care, and won him a Public Service Award from the Cleveland Newspaper Guild.

Sen. Frank J. Lausche, then governor of Ohio, credits Ostrow's reporting with being a major factor in winning voter approval of a state bond issue providing \$75 million for mental-hospital improvements.

Now a staff writer for the Cleveland Press, Ostrow is a member of the National Committee Against Mental Illness.

by Al Ostrow

THE BRIGHT FACE of America is speckled by 586 islands of misery and despair. These are the nation's mental hospitals—better known until recently as insane asylums and "snake pits."

From the outside, most of these institutions have a pleasantly landscaped campus atmosphere. But the trees and lawns receive more attention and better care than many of the 800,000 patients inside. Within the locked wards is the awful odor of decayed lives wasting away in wretchedness and neglect with seemingly no hope of cure.

Decades of spasmodic reform waves, major advances in medical science, and billions of dollars worth of new buildings have failed to end the shame of our mental hospitals.

Many thousands have benefited from the continuing improvements, but the majority of state hospital patients continue to cower in the dreary drabness of overcrowded, understaffed, penuriously operated institutions where little or nothing is done to cure their mental illness.

Listen to an official report of the state of Ohio, generally considered a progressive state in matters of public welfare:

"Tottering, elderly men and women . . . herded about like human cattle . . . sleeping in fetid firetrap dormitories with rows of beds only inches apart . . . squatting numbly on rickety benches and chairs in dismal day rooms . . . eating messy, unpalatable meals . . . spending their twilight years in a miasma of misery."

"It is regrettable to say, but in many instances the humane societies of Ohio see to it that animals are given better treatment than human beings. . . ."

"Living conditions, or existing conditions, for the majority of patients, have not been and are not

conducive to rapid recovery, if recovery is to be had at all. . . ."

The report was written by State Auditor James A. Rhodes, former mayor of Columbus and past president of the Amateur Athletic Union.

Shocked and dismayed by the human suffering he and other examiners found in a series of inspections of all Ohio mental institutions, Rhodes prefaced his unprecedented message to the legislature:

"All things set forth are not fantasy . . . they are not imaginary . . . nor are they exaggerated in any manner. . . . They are cold, hard facts. . . ."

The report to the legislature echoed a blistering indictment returned by a Cuyahoga County grand jury several years before. The jurors condemned state hospitals where the mentally ill are incarcerated and forgotten rather than treated and cured as "a prison for the well . . . a hell for the sick."

"We are told these inhuman conditions have long existed," the report declared. "If this be true, we indict all who have abetted—or even tolerated—such foul treatment of these unfortunate ill, even as history will indict us if we fail to redress this ancient and inexcusable wrong."

Looking back on the furore which this indictment created, the jury foreman, the Rev. D. R. Sharpe, a Baptist minister, shakes his head sadly today and concedes that state hospital conditions are still essentially the same.

"People are put in to rot and disintegrate, not to be cured," he says. "There is no excuse for the philosophy that the purpose of the hospital is to keep these patients at a minimum of expense, rather than to treat them for their mental ailments."

This writer has talked to scores of sincere, conscientious state hospital superintendents from coast to coast. All wish they could provide a program of intensive, total treatment aimed at pulling every