Some Psychiatric Hospital Stays Unjustified

In the 1980s insurance programs often covered psychiatric care. Many psychiatric hospitals took advantage of this by admitting patients when it was unjustified or by keeping them in the hospital longer than necessary, reports Peter Kerr in the New York Times. He cites a Defense Department study of more than 500 patients admitted to U.S. psychiatric hospitals in 1990.

The study found that, according to the hospitals' records, 33 percent of patients should not have been admitted, and an additional 31 percent stayed longer than necessary. The deputy assistant secretary of defense for professional affairs and quality assurance, Rear Adm. Edward Martin, concludes that abuse of the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS), an insurance program that provides mental health benefits to dependents of military personnel and retirees, is "symptomatic of a mental health industry in which the major incentives are financial."

The cost of mental health programs rose 126 percent between 1986 and 1989. In 1989 CHAMPUS paid $2.5 billion in benefits, of which $613 million was for mental healthcare. But the trend toward higher spending seems to have abated. "As a result of close case management and the ending of contracts with some programs, the G.A.O. [Government Accounting Office] found that CHAMPUS psychiatric costs had leveled off in the last two years," says Kerr.

At an April hearing before the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, psychiatric hospitals' exploitation of insurance benefits came to the fore. Former hospital employees, state officials, and medical experts testified that diagnoses were changed to fit insurance coverage and that many patients were "cured" the day their insurance benefits ran out. Sen. Mike Moncrief, D-TX, said some psychiatric hospital chains had paid public school officials for student records to learn who might be admitted as patients.

The Defense Department study found that "many of the psychiatric programs appeared to provide poor or dangerously deficient care," adds Kerr. He describes an incident at a California psychiatric hospital in which a 13-year-old girl (who told counselors she needed help) hanged herself as a staff member coming to her aid dawdled on the way to her room. In April, Kerr reports, a federal district court in California agreed to allow CHAMPUS to cut off payments to the hospital.

Grocery Shopping without Stress

Grocery shopping is one task most people, especially those in high-stress jobs, would rather not face. To help make its employees' lives easier, Bon Secours Hospital, Grosse Pointe, MI, began offering a grocery-shopping service this past April.

The hospital has contracted with Errands Unlimited, Inc., Grosse Pointe Woods, to shop for Bon Secours employees while they work. Hospital staff give their orders to human resource personnel, and Errands Unlimited delivers their groceries the next afternoon. Employees pay a $5 fee each time they use the service, and Bon Secours underwrites an equal amount.

Bon Secours decided to provide Express Shopping because 86 percent of the staff are women whose husbands also work or single mothers, explains Tom Conley, director of human resources. "Our employees face more demands than the normal worker, so we hope to alleviate some of their stress," says Conley. Express Shopping is the first program of its kind at a Michigan hospital. It is based on a similar service offered by Riverside Methodist Hospital, Columbus, OH.

Nearly 100 employees have begun using Express Shopping since the service became available. The responses have been positive. Pathology employee Carol Stead uses the service every week. She notes, "It's nice not to run around getting things, especially at some of the stores that are busy and crowded." Obstetrics employee Maggie Costakis adds, "I have two small children, and now I don't have to lug them along to the store."

Errands Unlimited shops at five area food stores, giving employees many choices, including fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, and fish.

Express Shopping is not the only service making the lives of Bon Secours employees less stressful. The hospital recently began offering a new child care option through a local YMCA in St. Clair Shores.

The YMCA is equipped to care for children two-and-a-half to five years of age. The hospital has reserved slots for up to 10 children of Bon Secours staff. "This agreement begins to answer a dramatic need for high-quality child care services," says Bon Secours Chief Executive Officer Henry DeVries, Jr. According to DeVries, the YMCA intends to renovate a convent to accommodate infants and toddlers, thus addressing the needs of even more Bon Secours employees.
Opening Up the Mind

Until recently, our scant knowledge about how the brain works came from inferences based on what happens in brains that don't work. But new technologies now allow scientists to take a close look at the normal brain in operation, according to an article in *Newsweek*.

Research made possible by these technologies has confirmed some widely accepted theories, but it has also produced a number of surprises, Sharon Begley and colleagues report. For example, using a device that detects minute changes in magnetic fields, scientists at New York University (NYU) pinpointed the parts of the brain that "hear" various sounds. According to NYU physicist Samuel Williamson, these areas are arranged like piano keys: "The distance between brain areas that hear low C and middle C is the same as the distance between the areas that hear middle C and high C." The NYU scientists also found that loud and quiet sounds register in different parts of the brain.

Some of the more interesting findings have to do with how the brain learns and processes information. Richard Haier, a scientist at the Brain Imaging Center at the University of California, Irvine, has discovered that new players of the computer game Tetris expend much more "brain energy" than more experienced and effective players. Haier speculates that the latter group use less energy because they have learned "what brain areas not to use." According to his study, subjects whose brain-energy expenditure dropped the most as they moved along the Tetris learning curve were those with the highest IQs, indicating that intelligence may be a matter of more efficient use of neurons in the brain.

But despite the growing sophistication of our brain maps, philosophers remain embroiled in the traditional controversy over whether the brain simply "is" the mind. In another *Newsweek* article, David Gelman and associates report that recent interest in the question has produced some new theories—but also reproduced some old arguments.

One of the stars to emerge from the flurry of polemics is Daniel Dennet, an uncompromising materialist whose 1991 book, *Consciousness Explained*, argued that the mind is, in the end, "nothing but a physical phenomenon."

Head of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, Dennett has become famous in part because of his talent for using grotesque versions of his opponents' theses to construct his own. Responding to neurobiologist William Calvin's description of the mind as "a unity of conscious experience," Dennett counters with a model of the brain as an almost random collection of works in progress. "Information entering the nervous system is under continuous 'editorial revision,'" he writes, "so that at any point in time there are multiple 'drafts' of narrative fragments at various stages of editing in various places in the brain."

Dennett's detractors retort that his theory fails to explain the serviceable impression of unity that leads a normal person to feel that he or she has a discrete "self."

And so the argument continues. Perhaps some day researchers will discover the fold on the cerebral cortex that speculates on itself. Or maybe the academicians will finally agree that we do, or do not, have minds.