

TRENDS & Ideas

INSURANCE ABUSE

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 Department of Defense 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.

EMPLOYEE SERVICES

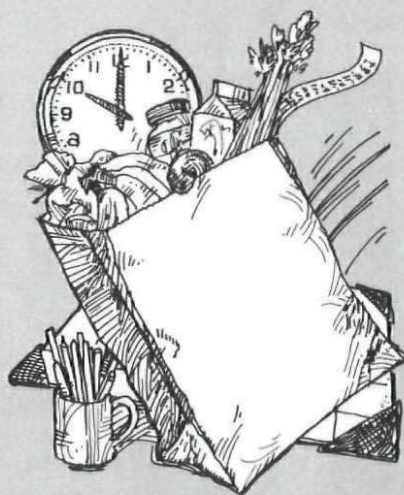
Grocery Shopping without Stress

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.

Compensation Comparisons

Hospital medical directors who have been in their positions less than three years receive higher wages and more benefits than those with longer tenure, according to a 1991 survey of medical directors conducted by Physician Executive Management Center, Tampa, FL.

More than 400 physician executives—from hospitals, managed care organizations, group practices, and industry—responded to the survey. The center's *Physician Executive Compensation Report*, which summarizes the findings, reveals that in 1991 hospital medical directors with less than three years on their current job receive an average total compensation of \$155,570. Counterparts who have been in a position more than seven years are compensated, on average, \$136,356.

On the other hand, almost 60 percent of recently hired medical directors reported prior managerial experience—in most cases, with the same hospital. By contrast, fewer than half of responding hospital medical managers with more than three years' experience had worked as managers before they assumed their current position.

The survey also reveals that the highest-

paid medical directors have no clinical duties and spend the majority of their time supervising physicians. Highly paid directors are also likely to have a written contract with a parachute and to receive a bonus as a portion of their compensation. They come to their present position with three to six years of management experience, have an advanced management degree, are between 40 and 60 years old, and have between 5 and 20 years of clinical experience.

For medical directors in general, compensation rates have kept pace with inflation over the past few years. Their average compensation was about the same regardless of the organization type with which they were affiliated (i.e., hospitals managed care, group practice, and industry).

Directors typically spend about half their time acting as liaisons between medical staff and administration and working on quality assurance projects—the two areas they believe to be the most important and enjoyable aspects of their job. Other important duties include strategic planning, community and professional external relations, and physician recruitment.



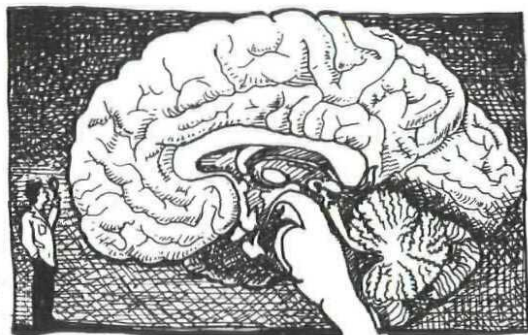
argued that the mind is, in the end, "nothing but a physical phenomenon."

Head of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, Dennet 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," Dennet 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."

Dennet'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.



Sim Gellman

SCIENCE

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*,