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PITTSBURGH – THE POSSIBILITY OF AN EXCITING EXPERIMENT IN INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

By **JAN McMANES**, Coordinator, Program for the Deaf, Dixmont State Hospital

In 1967, when the Counseling and Community Center for the Deaf in Pittsburgh was a pilot study funded by a grant from the Social and Rehabilitation Service, a young seventeen year old deaf patient arrived at Dixmont State Hospital. Her method of communication was manual and no one in the hospital was at all familiar with sign language. A rehabilitation counselor at Dixmont, however, recognized the fact that the “hand signals” of the patient were a legitimate form of communication. Through Dr. Ross Stuckless, then on the staff of the University of Pittsburgh, the Counseling Center was contacted and a liaison between the two facilities was established. This relationship has developed and strengthened over the past five years.

In 1968, a conference was held at Dixmont with C.C.D., Hospital, State, and Federal representatives to discuss the possibility of developing an in-patient and out-patient mental health service program for the deaf citizens of Western Pennsylvania.

The idea itself was considered with enthusiasm but a subsequent search for an adequately qualified program coordinator was fruitless, until the rehabilitation counselor decided to return to the University of Pittsburgh for a post masters diploma in the area of deafness. This course included an invaluable eight weeks internship at Saint Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C., where the rehabilitation counselor from Dixmont observed the development of the formal Mental Health Unit for the Deaf in Washington.

In 1970, the Program for the Deaf became a reality at Dixmont. The first assignment was, with the help of C.C.D., to discover the prelingually deaf patients located in the hospital itself. Two short term patients were identified upon admission. Their deafness was recognized and they were treated and discharged. The young girl who first focused hospital attention on deafness was transferred to Saint Elizabeths for sophisticated psychiatric care and four more long term hospital patients with some signing skills were brought together for activities during the day. These patients ranged in age

PITTSBURGH – THE POSSIBILITY OF AN EXCITING EXPERIMENT

from 30 to 85, and all had been hospitalized for from fifteen to thirty-five years.

The youngest, age thirty, had spent all of her hospitalization on a locked ward, but before the first year of the program was over, she was transferred to an open ward. She has been functioning well as an open-ward patient for two years. Although Dixmont is a small hospital, each prelingually deaf patient had felt that he or she was the only deaf person in the hospital. It took two or three months before these patients really began to relate to each other and began reusing and remembering their basic communication skills.

The search for other professionals continued and in June, 1971, Miss Patricia Ann Ford, a 1971 graduate of Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., joined the staff as Assistant Coordinator to the Program. During the Spring of 1971, a survey form to locate deaf patients in other hospitals was mailed to the superintendents of the seven other State Hospitals in the Western Region. These forms, devised by Mr. Thomas Goulder of St. Elizabeths, were distributed to all the wards, and the aides filled out forms on all those patients who did not speak or were known to have hearing difficulties of some sort. During that summer, Miss Ford and/or the Program Coordinator visited the other hospitals, sometimes accompanied by members of the staff of C.C.D., read case histories and screened patients.

At the same time, a formal contract between C.C.D., Pittsburgh Hearing and Speech Society, and Dixmont State Hospital was approved by the Office of Administration in Harrisburg. This provided the hospital with the back-up services of a clinical psychologist knowledgeable in the area of deafness plus other skilled counselors and audiologists. It was agreed that in the future, Dixmont would provide in-patient services for those community residents in need of psychiatric care.

In November of 1971, C.C.D. provided a deaf teacher who met with volunteers and staff of the hospital for three hours each week and introduced the professionals, para-professionals, and volunteers to the American Sign Language.

At specified times during this program which ran from November until July, various other members from the staffs of the other two agencies provided lectures on audiology, the psychology of deafness, and the life style of the deaf. As the class became more advanced, members of the deaf community would sometimes join the group and sign to the students.

The problem of finding a psychiatrist interested in the treatment of the deaf patient was investigated jointly by the Program Coordinator at the Hospital and the Executive Director of the Counseling Center, since that was now the one key person both organizations lacked. Since C.C.D. had been designated the out-patient clinic for the deaf population of Western Pennsylvania, the search for a psychiatrist was of vital importance to the success of both programs.

PITTSBURGH – THE POSSIBILITY OF AN EXCITING EXPERIMENT

Dr. Sherman Pochapin, on the staff of Western Psychiatric Institute, as well as being the liaison person between psychiatry and psychology at the University of Pittsburgh with a private practice in the city, listened and was interested. During one period of his life, he had developed bone conduction deafness, which later had been corrected by a stapedectomy and he knew what it was like to be deaf and wanted to become involved.

During the spring of 1972, a 19-bed ward at the hospital was renovated and painted to prepare for the patients scattered throughout the hospital system in the western part of the State.

During this period, staff members of the Vocational Rehabilitation Center and Goodwill of Pittsburgh followed the development of this new service and, in both instances, expressed an interest in becoming involved with the rehabilitation of the deaf patients.

At the same time, several departments at the University of Pittsburgh watched the program which they felt offered possibilities for student training on the graduate level. The possibility of offering a summer internship to one or two undergraduate students at Gallaudet in 1973 is being considered.

The liaison between two private agencies and a State hospital for the development of a comprehensive program for the rehabilitation of deaf patients is an exciting idea to those of us in Pittsburgh, and with the cooperation of other interested private agencies, such as Vocational Rehabilitation Center and Transitional Living, we hope to develop some innovative services to the deaf citizens of Western Pennsylvania.