



Dance therapy helps patients vent repressed emotions, may speed cure. The classes are conducted by Miss Marian Chace (standing)



Kind treatment has brought excellent results among the criminally insane inmates of Howard Hall. Here Dr. Howard Cruvant leads group discussion

# *Mental Hospital with*

*St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington accomplishes wonders with its patients by combining the very latest*

**D**URING a recent convention of the American Psychiatric Association, the superintendent of a state hospital found himself intrigued by an exhibit which depicted a startling approach to the problem of dealing with the criminally insane.

Before him were photographs showing murderers, homicidal maniacs, rapists and sex perverts being encouraged to use chisels, hammers, saws, carving tools and baseball bats.

True, the patients were putting these potential weapons to their proper use, as a part of their occupational and recreational activities. Nonetheless, a chisel can rip a throat; a baseball bat can break a head.

"I don't see how you get away with taking such a chance," commented the state official to a representative of St. Elizabeths Hospital, which was sponsoring the exhibit. "We wouldn't dare do it at our hospital."

This comment neatly summarized the quality which sets St. Elizabeths—a mental institution operated by the federal government at Washington, D.C.—apart from other hospitals of its kind: the willingness to take a chance on behalf of its patients.

It was at St. Elizabeths that doctors on this side of the Atlantic first tried treating paresis (syphilis of the brain) by inducing malarial fever in the patient. It was at St. Elizabeths, some years ago, that the late Dr. William Alanson White fought to give the then radical concepts of Sigmund Freud an opportunity to be tested. In recent times, this institu-

tion has tried out other newfangled ideas, such as the use of dancing and drama as therapy for the mentally unbalanced. Above all, St. Elizabeths charted a new course in the humane treatment of mental patients, particularly those who are considered dangerously insane.

This is in keeping with the principles on which the institution was founded in 1855. St. Elizabeths was ordered built by Congress as a place for "the most humane care and enlightened curative treatment" of the mentally ill. The moving spirit behind the establishment of the hospital was a gentle, kindly woman named Dorothea Lynde Dix. Retired from teaching by a physical disability, she was galvanized into leading a crusade for reform when she discovered the shocking plight of the insane of her day, most of whom were confined in jails, almshouses and even stables and kennels.

From 1840 to 1881, Miss Dix's inspiring energy initiated the founding or enlarging of 32 mental hospitals in this country and abroad. Virtually by herself, she persuaded Congress to construct in the nation's capital a government hospital for the insane. It was built, appropriately, on a tract named by its former owner for St. Elizabeth of Hungary, who was canonized for her work in behalf of the sorely afflicted. The name was retained for the hospital.

In keeping with the ideals of Dorothea Dix, St. Elizabeths through the years has been a pioneer in the still relatively unexplored field of mental illness. During the past half century, under Dr. White and his successor, Dr. Winfred Overholser, it has at-

tained an outstanding reputation in its field for treatment, research and education.

St. Elizabeths serves some 7,000 "federal wards" from all over the country—primarily servicemen, veterans and residents of the District of Columbia, but also federal prisoners, merchant sailors, Virgin Islanders, Canal Zone residents and others. Although a large part of the institution's expenses are paid by the District of Columbia, the rest comes—through Congress—from taxpayers all over the nation. This circumstance, plus the fact that patients from every state of the Union are treated there, gives St. Elizabeths a distinctly national character. Even so, it is relatively little known to the American public. It rarely makes the headlines except when a notorious indicted traitor like Ezra Pound gets committed (and wins a prize for poetry, while an inmate), or when one of the press associations picks up a "White House case."

Washington, as the seat of the government, is visited "by more than its proportion of insane persons"—a phenomenon observed by the Washington Intelligencer as far back as 1835. Every year a score or more such persons find their way to the capital to demand payment of a pension, to seek relief from some fancied persecution, to claim some mythical fortune, to give advice on running the country, to proclaim an invention that will stop wars.

Most of the deranged visitors want to see the President, who symbolizes the authority of the federal government. Shortly after the sensational attempt to assassinate President Truman last fall,

PHOTOGRAPH BY FOR COLLETS E. LARGE JAMES



Red Cross maintains a club at St. Elizabeths, under the direction of Margaret Gardner (left). The pianist is volunteer worker Andrew B. ...



In psychodrama, patients act out their problems, ease mental conflicts. At left is Dr. William Overholser, the superintendent

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By SAM STAVISKY

while hundreds of persons were still milling around the area, a cowboy-booted, gaudily dressed man was arrested in a phone booth only 600 yards away in the act of calling the FBI and demanding to see the President. He was unarmed and appeared to have no knowledge of the Puerto Ricans' attempt to storm Blair House. This man was placed under observation and then taken to St. Elizabeths.

Handling these "White House cases" is but a minor activity of St. Elizabeths. The significant story is the humane and enlightened manner in which the institution treats and cares for its patients—especially at a time when the nation is being roused by stories of horror about the degrading life led by many of the country's 700,000 patients in overcrowded, understaffed state and county mental hospitals.

Dr. William Menninger, of the famed Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, has pointed out lack of money is the principal reason for the low standards of so many public mental institutions. Congress has been liberal with St. Elizabeths. It gets, and spends, more money annually per patient than any comparable state or county mental hospital in the nation. A survey taken in 1949 disclosed that the average American state and Canadian provincial mental hospital was expending \$1.85 a day per patient; St. Elizabeths was then spending \$4.15 and now is spending \$4.26. It also had the highest patient-personnel ratio—one employee for every 2.8 patients, compared with a national average of about one to five.

To those critics who insist that the state govern-

ments cannot afford to be as liberal with their mental hospital budgets as Uncle Sam, the experience of St. Elizabeths offers this lesson: In the long run it costs less, in terms of patient improvement and recovery, to operate an adequately financed mental hospital.

Overcrowded, undermanned, lacking in facilities and equipment, the state and county institutions often provide little more than a bed and meager board for their patients. In such hospitals the patients stay longer, and relatively fewer are discharged as improved or recovered.

During the past year, 1,648 persons were admitted to St. Elizabeths; over the same period, 960 patients were discharged as improved or recovered. During World War II, St. Elizabeths concentrated on mentally ill Navy personnel, achieving an 80 per cent recovery rate for some 5,000 of these patients.

One reason why St. Elizabeths has been able to get adequate funds—though not all it would like to get—is the ability of its superintendent, Dr. Overholser, to put over his program to the budget-scrutinizing Congressional committees.

The fifty-eight-year-old psychiatrist's success in the fiscal field may be partly due to the fact that he graduated from Harvard in 1912 with a *cum laude* in economics before deciding to turn to medicine and psychiatry. A big bear of a man, good-natured and capable, he rose to become Massachusetts Commissioner of Mental Diseases in 1934, then was squeezed out of the post two years later when he ran afoul of political maneuverings. The

following year, at the recommendation of a panel of leading psychiatrists, the government named Dr. Overholser to succeed Dr. William Alanson White, who had recently died, as head of St. Elizabeths.

In that capacity, Dr. Overholser encourages disciples of all the schools of psychiatry—the followers of Freud, Jung, Adler, Meyer and the rest—to join the hospital staff. He believes that no one school of thought has all the answers. He has the same attitude toward treatment. St. Elizabeths utilizes every modern method and type of treatment, and is always willing to try out a new idea, or an old idea. Electroshock, insulin subshock, penicillin-malarial treatment, lobotomy (brain surgery), individual psychotherapy and group therapy, occupational and recreational therapy are all applied—discriminatingly—at St. Elizabeths.

"It's nonetheless a fact that many of the patients improve or get well apparently for no other reason than that they have responded to a friendly atmosphere," says Dr. Overholser. Such an atmosphere, the doctors at St. Elizabeths have found, helps to overcome the barriers of suspicion, hostility and hatred behind which the patient barricades himself in the course of his mental illness.

The warm spirit of St. Elizabeths manifests itself in many ways: in Mrs. Dixie Wright, a little gray-haired volunteer worker who has been taking depressive patients for a ride into the country every week for 22 years; in the nurses who, on their own time and at their own expense, baked two dozen cakes and threw a party for the patients of their wards; in the loyalty of (Continued on page 67)



