



TRIBUNE Staff Photo

Patients sit for hours outside their rooms in Park House, 2320 S. Lawndale, one of nursing homes investigated by Tribune reporters.

Crippled and Elderly Patients Abused in North Side Home

BY PHILIP CAPUTO

The toothless old woman, her shoulders bent by age and disease, stood in the kitchen doorway staring at two nurse's aides drinking coffee.

Her request was a simple one: she wanted a cup.

"Well, you can't have any," one of the aides responded.

"Why not?" asked the woman, her arthritic hands clutching a metal walker.

"Shut up, frog mouth; we're runnin' this kitchen," the aide snapped. The woman stood expressionless for a moment, then shuffled away to her room.

90-Year-Old Kicked

It was 7 a. m. in the Beacon Hill Nursing Home, 4530 N. Beacon St., where I worked as a maintenance man. The verbal abuse inflicted upon this helpless woman was mild compared with the other mistreatment the 33 patients in the home suffered at the hands of the staff.

Before my brief stay was over, I would see a 90-year-old cripple punched and kicked for brushing a diseased foot against the uniform of an employe. I would also observe two aged women reduced to the depths of degradation as they screeched and clawed for possession of a tattered blanket after a winter night without heat.

I would see roaches scurrying across floors that were crusted with accumulated filth, smell the persistent stench of human waste, hear the hysterical cries of former mental patients who lived in the home amid the elderly, and I would feel the touch of an old woman's trembling hand as she begged me to sweep her out of the place.

"Sweep Me Away"

Her poignant plea was made on my first day as I was cleaning the floor. "Go ahead, sweep me out of here," she said. "Sweep me away. I don't care. It's more than I can stand."

Most Americans will recall Feb. 5 as the day Apollo 14 landed on the moon. The patients in Beacon Hill will remember it as the day the boiler ruptured and near-zero cold, driven by gale-like winds, pierced the walls of the decaying building.

Thruout the day, the words, "I'm cold, I'm cold," echoed down the gloomy halls of Beacon Hill.

Wrapped in Sweaters

Wrapped in threadbare sweaters, in worn blankets and shabby coats, many of the patients huddled silently in dim corners.

A 60-year-old man named

Monroe sat in the second floor TV room watching the moon landing.

"Well, there they are," he said. "What the hell are they doing up there? What good does it do for us? We need money for schools, for the poor, for places like this."

Monroe asked me to find Morris Weintraub, the administrator, and tell him to turn up the heat. Neither the patients nor I knew at the time that the boiler had ruptured during the night.

Helpless on Floor

"Tell him we're freezing. The heat was off all last night. It could kill some of these people," Monroe said.

As I anxiously searched for the administrator, I heard an elderly woman recount her own night of agony as she lay helpless on a cold floor. She complained to a companion:

"The window in my room slipped last night and all that cold air was coming in. I got up to shut it, but I slipped and fell and couldn't get up again. I called for a nurse, but one didn't come for the longest time. I don't know how long I was on that floor."

Then she broke into sobs: "Oh, God, oh God, oh God, I'm so sick of it."

Struggle for Blanket

In another room, a woman accused another of stealing her blanket. "It's my blanket, you stole it," she screeched. "No, it isn't. I found it on the floor," shouted the other. They started struggling for the blanket.

A nurse's aide entered and mediated the dispute with curses and threats. "Shut your damned mouths, both of you," she shouted. "If you don't shut up this minute, I'll take all your blankets away and you both can freeze!"

The women kept yelling and the aide reached into her pocket and brandished a drug-filled syringe. "Now you gonna shut up, or do I have to jab you

with this!" she yelled. The women cowed, sobbing, "Yes, all right, yes."

When I finally found Weintraub, he dismissed the lack of heat as a problem that would be solved later in the day and insisted that I turn my attention to waxing the front hallway. His obsession with the appearance of the front hallway stemmed from his fear of the City Health Department.

"Forget the rooms," he told me on more than one occasion. "The lobby and [front] hall are the first thing the health department will see if they show up."

Later the same day, I saw a 90-year-old man suffer the indignity and pain of physical punishment, administered by a young nurse's aide. The man was senile and confined to a wheelchair.

As the aide was placing a slipper on his infected foot, he accidentally brushed her uniform with his foot.

Kicks Him on Leg

Calling him a "no good bastard," she kicked him on the leg and punched him in the shoulder. The man cried out, and the aide barked "you, you do that again and I'm gonna beat you."

The aide did not stop there. A short time later, after the man had involuntarily urinated in his pants, she called him a series of vile names, then left him to sit in his own waste. Another nurse's aide threatened to hold his pant leg out the window until it froze.

Perhaps the one statement that best expresses the attitude of the staff at Beacon Hill toward the elderly and mentally ill came during my final hours of employment. As I was about to leave one afternoon, the director of nursing made this observation:

"I wish they'd just get these patients out of here. They're the most disgusting people I've ever seen."