

# Filth and neglect bared at von Solbrig Hospital

IT IS A CRITICAL period for the 6-year-old girl lying in an anesthetized sleep on the operating table in von Solbrig Memorial Hospital. Only minutes ago she had undergone two operations, a tonsillectomy and surgical repair of a hernia.

But the only other person in the operating room is a \$2-an-hour janitor, in his unsanitary working clothes, who has just put down his mop in the corridor outside and rushed in to watch over the young patient at the request of a nurse.

The surgeon, the nurses, nurses' aides, and the anesthesiologist have all gone. And for several moments, until the nurse returns to relieve him, the janitor is in charge of the patient.

The janitor is Tribune Task Force re-

## Task Force Report

Chicago's only for-profit general hospital, von Solbrig Memorial, is one doctor's personal fiefdom where financial shortcuts go hand in hand with unsafe and unsound medical practices. Filth, dangerous understaffing, and violations of city and state regulations uncovered there are detailed in this, the first of a series, by Task Force Director Pamela Zekman, and reporters Jay Branegan, William Crawford, and William Gaines.

porter William Gaines, who found himself summoned into the operating room as many as six times in a single week, often in soiled clothing, to assist patients at Chicago's only for-profit general hospital.

Gaines was a member of a Task Force investigating team that found the 83-bed hospital at 6500 S. Pulaski Rd. poorly maintained, understaffed, and in apparent violation of medical standards and city and state regulations.

"THAT'S THE grossest type of mismanagement I've ever heard," Dr. Hugh Firor, head of pediatric surgery at Cook County Hospital, said when told of Gaines' aid to the young tonsillectomy patient. Firor said the girl could have inhaled blood into her lungs.

Other doctors said cardiac disturbances or hemorrhaging could strike in the time right after surgery.

And Edward King, assistant commissioner of the Chicago Board of Health, said the use of a janitor in the operating room simply "breaks sterile technique."

DURING THE several weeks that Gaines worked in the hospital, he and other reporters found:

- The emergency room, licensed by

the city as a "basic emergency care" facility, often has no doctor specifically assigned to emergency-room duty, as required by city and state codes.

- Only 18 of 50 doctors listed as staff members actually practice at the hospital. The others have left the state, ceased practicing at the hospital years ago, never practiced there, or are dead.

- An elderly patient, a cast around her chest, wept daily from pain and frustration as untrained hospital personnel, including janitors, struggled to lift her from her wheelchair to her bed. Most hospitals have trained personnel and bedside lifts for such tasks.

- Urine was allowed to stand for

Continued on page 10, col. 1

# Fifth and neglect bared at von Solbrig Hospital

Continued from page one

hours on the floor of a patient's room. The urine was cleaned up only after the reporter-janitor was called into service because the janitor on duty had been ordered to paint the hospital owner's cabin cruiser.

Patients with private health insurance were admitted for long stays in von Solbrig after other hospitals and doctors had pronounced them healthy. The man was operated on after three doctors told him he was in good enough health to return to work.

**THE RESPONSIBILITY** for conditions in the hospital rests with Dr. Charles R. von Solbrig, 63, the hospital's sole owner and director. He controls every facet of the operation from hiring the lowest eme to surgery, just as he has from the hospital's foundation when he helped build the structure with his own hands. It was Dr. von Solbrig who personally hired Gaines as a janitor.

The hospital last October lost its accreditation from the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Hospitals, but Dr. von Solbrig continues to operate the 15-year-old facility on licenses from the Chicago Board of Health and the Illinois Department of Public Health. Either agency has authority to close the hospital.

In 1964, Dr. von Solbrig pleaded no contest to a federal indictment charging that he had evaded \$43,812 in income taxes. He was placed on probation for three years and permitted to keep his medical license.

The Illinois Department of Registration and Education has been investigating complaints involving his treatment of patients.

**FOR THE DOCTOR**, running Chicago's only proprietary (for-profit) general hospital is a business. Reporters found Dr. von Solbrig to be a cost-conscious administrator who fails to keep an adequate number of nurses, aides, and orderlies on the payroll. As a result, inexperienced persons were thrown into jobs normally done by trained medical personnel.

Gaines saw nurses' aides routinely used to awaken patients in the recovery room after surgery and return them to their rooms, a violation of state regulations that require them to be attended by a registered nurse and released by a doctor.

The reporter once was called from his janitorial duties into the recovery room to help with the arms of a patient while a crew of nurses and doctors labored to save the patient's life.

One day when Gaines was at the hospital on day off, he was called into the operating room in his street clothes to help lift a heavy patient. On three occasions, Gaines was ordered to don a lead neck and to hold elderly patients in position for X-rays.



Dr. Charles R. von Solbrig, President, medical director, administrator, and chief surgeon of von Solbrig Hospital.

**AT VON SOLBRIG**, he found, there was only one orderly, an unpaid, untrained 16-year-old who within three days on the job was working as an assistant in the operating room. He bragged to a Tribune reporter and to his parents, who are friends of Dr. von Solbrig, that he was "ready into some heavy surgery."

The youth said he washed and scrubbed patients before surgery; assisted the nurses and doctors during appendectomies and stomach and intestinal operations; and helped the nurses ensure that all the surgical sponges were removed from patients following surgery.

The hospital was so short of personnel one Saturday afternoon that the entire hospital staff consisted of Dr. von Solbrig, one registered nurse, one licensed practical nurse, and three nurses' aides. The nurses complained that they were ragged from the work load. Some of the five emergency cases that day had to wait while the medical staff tended patients in the rooms.

**THE NEXT DAY**, when emergency cases were lined up waiting for care and the staff stultified between patients' rooms and the emergency room, Gaines had to assist nurses when an elderly woman patient choked and fell to the floor.

When interviewed by The Tribune, Dr. von Solbrig refused to disclose how many registered nurses he employs. "That's not your business," he said.

Regarding the staffing observed that

Saturday, Dr. von Solbrig insisted, "Every floor has a registered nurse at every station—on every three stations—every day. No exceptions. If you didn't see them here, they were here; don't you dare say they weren't here because they were."

**WITH THAT**, the doctor stalked out of the interview, leaving behind his lawyer, his public relations counselor, and two other employees. He has refused to answer further questions.

One of the unanswered questions concerned the emergency room, which under city regulations should have at least one licensed doctor on specific emergency-room duty at all times. That doctor "may not be assigned to any other duties," a Chicago Board of Health spokesman said.

But von Solbrig hospital is staffed at night by a lone resident who must split his duties between the emergency room and the resident patients.

And during the day it was not uncommon for Dr. von Solbrig to be the only physician on the premises, yet tied up with office patients or surgery.

**FOR EXAMPLE**, Dr. von Solbrig had left the hospital to march in a parade the day Mrs. Claire Gleffe, 616 S. Keeler Av., came to the emergency room with a badly stubbed toe. She was seen by a nurse and an X-ray technician, who successfully put a splint on her foot.

The only doctor on the premises while Dr. von Solbrig was absent for several hours was Dr. Lewis Silver, the radiologist, who does not qualify under Board

of Health standards as the emergency room doctor, a spokesman for the board said.

The hospital bill for the services included a \$750 doctor's fee. Mrs. Gleffe said no doctor treated her.

"I paid the \$24 for the X-ray and the other things, but I never saw a doctor, so I'm not going to pay it," she said in an interview. "It isn't the money, it's the principle. Hospitalization would have paid for it. I just like justice."

**THE TRIBUNE** found cleanliness and sanitation at the hospital suffered because the small maintenance staff often was further depleted as janitors were ordered to run personal errands for Dr. von Solbrig.

"It's too busy on the floor today," Gaines was told by one elderly co-worker who had sole responsibility for cleaning the first floor. "I can't handle it all. Then the doctor had me wash his car. I don't know if I can get it all done."

**GAINES FOUND** that insects abounded in the hospital and discovered a fertile breeding ground for them in a damp closet where rolls of toilet paper were stored. He washed walls that apparently hadn't been washed in years, and swept cobwebs from behind the doors of patients' rooms.

But economy then thin staffing is only one side of the balance sheet. Each day a patient stays in the hospital, which has numerous vacant beds, adds to its income.

The Tribune found that some patients were admitted for stays of a week and

more after other doctors said they needed no hospitalization.

The family of Mahmoud Hassan, 45, including his wife, Bakresh, 33, his son, Faris, 2, and his father, Farhat, 70, came to von Solbrig the day after they had been involved in what police termed a minor traffic accident in southwest suburban Homewood. A tractor cab had bumped them from behind when the Hassan car made a false start at a stop light, according to police.

**"THERE'S NO WAY** in the world that accident could have caused excessive damage . . . it was just a tap," said Homewood Patrolman Wendell Flint, who witnessed the incident.

The whole Hassan family was taken to Christ Community Hospital in Oak Lawn, where they were examined and X-rayed by staff doctors. They complained of pains in the back and neck and were released with instructions to apply heat to the sore spots, according to hospital records.

But the next day they were admitted to the von Solbrig Memorial Hospital after being examined by Dr. von Solbrig. Mrs. Hassan left after a week with the child, who spent most of his confinement toddling up and down the second-floor halls, playing with his toys, and throwing a tennis ball against the wall. The men left a week later.

**THE FAMILY** spent much of their time walking about, chatting, reading, and visiting Osama Betoumi, 21, who spent 33 days in the hospital under Dr. von Solbrig's care after he had been

examined by three other doctors who found him to be healthy.

Betoumi, of 5365 S. Damen Av., said he hurt his back while working at the Sweetheart Cup Co., where he is a forklift driver. The company physician prescribed hot packs and other simple treatment, but Betoumi said the pain persisted.

Betoumi then went to a specialist at Christ Community Hospital for muscle and nerve tests. "They didn't tell me anything," Betoumi said of the negative test findings.

The company then sent Betoumi to a Loop industrial surgeon in the office of Dr. W.A. Chohay, 129 S. La Salle St., where he was again given a three examination and told he could report back to work. Among the ailments the doctor looked for and ruled out was a possible hernia.

After a week back on the job, Betoumi was still complaining of the same injury. He went to von Solbrig hospital.

**DR. VON SOLBRIG** admitted Betoumi, who is covered by a Blue Cross major medical policy, and a week later operated on him for a double hernia.

Betoumi's only complaint while he was in the hospital was his long stay after the operation.

"I know other guys who have had the same operation and they go home in a few days," he told janitor-reporter Gaines. "I've been here more than a month. I think it's because I got good insurance."

Tomorrow: Assembly-line consultants.