

Advocates listen, help patients with problem

By JAN JOHNSON
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John A. is a patient in the Wake unit at Dorothea Dix Hospital. He feels mistreated because other patients go to the canteen and he doesn't. Who does he complain to?

One night a week John can voice his complaints and problems to a volunteer in the patients' advocacy program. Some quick checking showed that John could go — but he had been afraid to ask and the staff hadn't outlined his privileges.

The volunteer layman's program began in the Wake unit a year ago, sponsored by the Wake County Mental Health Association.

It allows patients to talk to advocates who either clear up the problem immediately or make a report to an advocates' panel for a final decision. The panel makes recommendations to the hospital in order to provide feedback on patient problems.

Dix officials praise the program. They say it has



Benjamin Sauber

drew up program

created a more relaxed, trusting atmosphere in the units.

The program will be expanded from Wake and Cherry units to three more units in November. The Cherry unit serves patients from Lee and Harnett counties. It will be in seven units and will serve 11 county units by the end of the year.

The Department of Human Resources is also considering expanding the program or a similar program statewide.

Benjamin Sauber, who drew up the program with support from the county association, said the program was respon-

sible for establishing a format for electroshock therapy.

"We were getting complaints that patients didn't want the therapy and also criticism from hospital personnel that sometimes patients who began treatment quit," he said.

The advocates recommended that patients be given a complete picture of what the treatment includes and the opportunity to accept or reject treatment. But if they start, they must continue the prescribed series. The hospital implemented the recommendation.

"The program has been a tremendous success. Since it began, I haven't had a single complaint from those units," said Dr. Peter Witt, hospital research director.

Witt is charged with handling complaints — "research scientists are relatively detached from the management structure," he said.

He said the advocates "are thoughtful and eager to do the right thing. They help the patients without creating trouble between staff and patients."

Dr. Peter Holden, an assistant superintendent, said the program "has been thoroughly good. I was anxious when it first began that aides might become hostile and defensive when complaints were lodged against them.

"But there have been few complaints against aides. Some justified complaints

have resulted in changes," Holden said.

Holden said patients complained that they didn't see doctors. "So I went around and made sure doctors saw patients at least once a week," he said. Other complaints resulted from ignorance of procedures "that no one bothered to tell them," he said.

Holden also said the program had boosted staff morale because there were so few complaints against aides. "We had many meetings with staff and advocates so they would know each other and what would be happening," he said.

Sauber said the association felt strongly that advocates should be volunteers and not employees of the hospital system.

"If a complaint led to a suit, we couldn't have an employee testifying against his employer," Sauber pointed out.

He said he also felt the employees are more relaxed with volunteer advocates. "We were apprehensive that the employees might feel threatened, but within a month their fears were gone and they began to refer patients to us," Sauber said.

Sauber said in handling complaints, "no criticisms were leveled until the complaint was checked out with supervisors and the head nurse."

He also said, "The patients trust us. They know we're not getting paid and we're there because we care. This helps them open up a good deal to us."

The program was "evolutionary, not drawn up in detail in advance," Sauber said.

Correction

William L. Timberlake, 18, who was killed in an auto accident Tuesday morning, was the son of Mr. and Mrs. W. L. Timberlake of Rt. 1, Woodland. His parents were misidentified in a story in The Raleigh Times Tuesday.