

Psych center probe reveals 'deficiencies'

South Beach facility's accreditation Violations could affect

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

A federal inspection has uncovered a variety of "deficiencies" at the South Beach Psychiatric Center, including the improper use of drugs and physical restraining devices, overcrowding and an unsanitary environment.

The findings could "seriously jeopardize" the state mental hospital's accreditation, according to Alan J. Saperstein, associate regional administrator of health standards and quality for

the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

The Health and Human Services Department conducted the inspection over two days at the end of last October. Saperstein said a team consisting of two physicians, a nurse, a pharmacist and a nutritionist visited the main 340-bed hospital in Ocean Breeze and its satellite wards in Brooklyn.

In one of many critical comments, the survey team said it found "extensive use" of camisoles, commonly known as

straightjackets, and of net devices for pinning patients to their beds. The use of such restraints "in modern-day psychiatric care and treatment is considered unacceptable," their report said.

Saperstein said yesterday that "without sensationalizing," he had found "an element of seriousness" in the inspection results.

But Dr. James A. Prevost, the state mental health commissioner, said the federal report presented an overly "dramatic"

view, exaggerating problems at the hospital. South Beach administrators declined comment.

In a Feb. 18 letter to the Health and Human Services Department, Dr. Prevost wrote: "While I appreciate that there have been a number of issues at South Beach that are now being addressed, I do not feel that a straightforward interpretation of HHS requirements would lead one to the dramatic conclusions you cite."

The federal inspectors found

that nurses were administering medication from "unclear" prescriptions. "Following such orders would result in subjecting patients to unnecessary risks of adverse reactions from overdoses of drugs," the report said.

The team noticed what it considered a pattern of faulty diagnosis when patients were admitted to the hospital. Physical examinations were "often perfunctory" and omitted neurological screening, the report said. Psychological profiles, it said, too often used "sketchy and very

brief" descriptions.

The inspectors reviewed the charts of five patients who were discharged from South Beach and then committed suicide by violent means such as "jumping off of high buildings." These patients were treated for schizophrenia, but a more accurate diagnosis would have called for antidepressant drugs and electroconvulsive therapy, the report said.

"In a number of instances, the

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presence of clear-cut depressive symptoms and signs appeared to be ignored," according to the report.

In another case, Tetrabenzazine, an experimental drug not yet approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration, was given to a patient without his signed consent, the inspectors said.

South Beach, in a written attachment to the report, flatly denied ever administering Tetrabenzazine.

Although South Beach is funded and equipped as a 400-bed institution, the inspectors found an inpatient census of 518 patients. The Brooklyn units account for 60 out of the 400-bed capacity.

To handle the "overcrowding," the report said, folding cots had been set up in the main facility on Staten Island. Some cots were observed wedged together in geometric formation, with three beds pushed together vertically and one positioned horizontally at their feet.

The survey found unsanitary conditions in the bathrooms of satellite wards located in Coney Island-Sheepshead Bay. It cited the absence of toilet paper and towels, "vomit or discolored fluid" on the floor and black streaks of "fungus or soap residue" on the tile walls.

Saperstein, the Health and Human Services regional administrator, said he had dispatched the inspectors to South Beach after the families of patients complained to his office and the Washington office of Secretary Richard Schweiker.

"Since so much federal dollars go there, we felt it was appropriate to get a team together," he said.

Saperstein said he had sent the report to the Chicago-based Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Hospitals, a private organization whose license is required for state hospitals to operate. The commission is scheduled to inspect South Beach next November.

The Health and Human Services survey echoes past criticism of South Beach by the joint Commission and the state Commission on the Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled.

Two years ago, the Joint Commission, citing overcrowding, granted South Beach a one-year accreditation, rather than the customary two years.

The Commission on Quality of Care has issued two reports charging the hospital with "disregarding" state regulations governing the use of drugs and restraints during the treatment of two patients. The patients, a 24-year-old man and a 19-year-old woman, died at South Beach, officially of heart failure, in 1979 and 1980.

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