

# Of mountains and molehills

## Probers hit state mental facilities

By BELLA ENGLISH

A state watchdog agency has found that facilities for the mentally ill and retarded spend at least \$2.5 million—or 200,000 man hours—a year reviewing internal incidents, with little result in correcting problems or disciplining abusive and negligent employees.

In releasing the report, the Commission on the Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled called for a major overhaul of the incident review system in state facilities. The commission found that too much time is spent on trivial mishaps, impairing the ability to deal with serious incidents.

The report also found that despite voluminous reporting on the incidents, little follow-up was done for corrective or preventive action. "The most apparent outcomes of the system appear to be mountains of paperwork," the report concluded.

**AMONG THE** deficiencies listed were: widespread misunderstanding over what to report as an incident and when; cursory investigations of most incidents often by untrained staffers under minimal supervision; inadequate investigations of alleged patient abuse, resulting in "a seriously limited capability to institute employee discipline," and a lack of oversight by the

individual facilities' Incident Review Committees.

"First among these flaws is the system's blunderbuss approach to the incident reporting which requires reporting, investigation, and a review of a variety of trivial occurrences that are an inevitable part of the day-to-day experience of any facility," the report stated.

Of the 100,000 reports issued annually, many are of minor incidents, while a large percentage of serious incidents of patient abuse and neglect go undetected and uninvestigated, the agency found. Major investigations are routinely relegated to staff members who have no formal training and who also are trying to deal with other job assignments, according to the report.

**"AS A RESULT,** serious matters that adversely affect patient care or facility management do not receive the critical attention they deserve, while energy is dissipated in complying with an endless bureaucratic process," the report stated.

Another major flaw in the system is the "passing-of-the-buck" mentality, under which no individual has responsibility for making the system work, the report stated.

The Commissioners of Mental Health and Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities agreed with many of the commission's comments and said they are taking steps to increase the effectiveness of the incident reporting system.