

StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Mental health

Minnesota's asylum on the street

In December of 1710, an Irish churchman named Jonathan Swift visited London to take in the usual sights — including, of course, the city's famous madhouse. St. Mary of Bethlehem ("Bedlam" for short) was a sort of zoo for the insane — its caged inhabitants on show for marvel and mockery. The author of "Gulliver's Travels" knew madness when he saw it, and he saw it plainly at Bedlam. Yet the madness that troubled him most wasn't in Bedlam's cells, but outside them. What kind of society, he wondered, makes such sport and spectacle of illness?

What kind, indeed? Swift could see the same madness here in Minnesota. Anyone can. Asylums for tourists may be out of fashion, but scorning the mentally ill is not. This state, like most others, has turned its psychiatric patients out of hospitals and into the streets. These days they carry their shackles with them — invisible shackles of untreated illness — and the gawkers gawk from a distance.

So the asylum has moved from the institution to the pavement. But do the mentally ill fare better than before? Some, perhaps — those with attentive families, health insurance or good luck. But many of Minnesota's seriously mentally ill — 40,000 or more, the head-counters say — get no help at all.

They wander and suffer. Sometimes they suffer so much they go looking for help. They walk into clinics and hospitals, and some find relief: a prompt appointment, a referral to a social-service agency, even a bed on a psychiatric ward. But beds are hard to come by, and promises of help tomorrow can feel theoretical to the desperate. Thus some who walk into hospitals walk out without the help they need. Sometimes they end up walking in the wrong direction — and soon there's another suicide to cluck at, or a mass murder, or a fatal encounter with the cops.

It's tempting, in the face of such tragedy, to blame Minnesota's hospitals and HMOs for their stinginess. Indeed, it's all the more tempting when one hears the care providers' defense: Their hands are tied, they say, by state commitment laws — which forbid involuntary hospitalization of people who pose no imminent peril to themselves or others.

That's disingenuous, of course. Nothing in state law — not even the declaration that mental-health services should be delivered in the least restrictive environment possible — forbids

Mental health

Seeking a system

hospitalizing patients who seek such help. There's no question that Minnesota's hospitals could do more to help clearly troubled but not clearly menacing care-seekers. Regarding the state's commitment law as a ceiling for professional responsibility — rather than as a minimum-standard floor — shirks the duty to treat.

But hospitals are not Minnesota's only shirkers, and they shouldn't bear the blame alone. Every psychiatrist, health-insurance company, cost-conscious employer, civil-liberties expert, public official, opinion leader and newspaper reader around shares the blame. It's been three decades since this state emptied its asylums and vowed to create a community-based "continuum of care" for the mentally ill. Though a patchwork of walk-in clinics, group homes and nonprofits serves the suffering, the pledge remains largely unfulfilled. Minnesota's mentally ill citizens remain abandoned. Left alone, the untreated thousands have created their own asylums — on heating grates, under bridges, in crack houses, in prison cells.

Hospitalization isn't the only answer to mental illness. But there ought to be more answers than there are. Most Minnesotans, for instance, have no idea whom to call if a loved one starts hearing voices or sliding toward suicide. Most have no idea what the "next step down" from hospitalization might be — or what a genuine continuum of mental-health services might look like. It seems the hospitals and HMOs have no idea, either. Otherwise, why haven't they acted? Why haven't they demanded that lawmakers keep their promises — and underwrite a real system of community-based care?

Minnesotans can easily shake off this madness. All they need is money, resolve and a sliver of compassion. They can take their lead from Jonathan Swift. When he died, Swift left his entire estate to build Ireland's first and best psychiatric hospital — St. Patrick's, which exists to this day — to provide "for ever after...victuals, clothing, medicines, attendance, and all other necessaries" for its residents.

It was an asylum, technically speaking — but a far better one than Minnesota is operating.