THE APPLICATION OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN THE
TREATMENT OF MENTAL ILLNESSES*

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There is no longer a question in the minds of physicians employed in the various mental hospitals as to the value of occupational therapy in the treatment of mental diseases. Its success depends upon its practical use and adaptation to the requirements of the patient. It is no panacea. It is a means of directing the patient's thoughts away from his own personal problems and aids him in adjusting himself to reality. It helps him to control his abnormal emotional responses toward his mental difficulties and directs those responses in a more healthful direction. It trains him to give up his asocial and antisocial behavior and to express socially useful and acceptable modes of living. It changes his unproductive activity into productive activity and produces feelings of contentment and satisfaction which are so important in mental health. It provides a direct pathway from phantasy to fact.

Occupational therapy is an adjunct to psychotherapy and medical treatment, supplementing them and increasing their value, thus bringing about an improvement or recovery, plus a decrease in the length of hospitalization.

In this paper, I do not plan to discuss fully any special form of this therapy but to state its purpose; to suggest certain views which I have in the method of procedure and to show the benefits derived from it by presenting several brief case summaries of patients who, I feel, have derived benefit from it.

Occupational therapy has been defined as the "work cure", because it means cure or improvement through physical efforts. I find, however, that some relatives object to the definition, "work cure", as it means to them manual labor. They object to their son, daughter, father or mother being made to do such things as they imply from such a definition.

Dr. H. A. Patterson, Potts Memorial Hospital, Livingston, N. Y., has defined occupational therapy as "any activity, mental or phy-

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sical, definitely prescribed and guided for the distinct purpose of contributing to and hastening recovery from disease or injury”.

Accordingly, any activity directed therapeutically is occupational therapy, whether it is conducted in a classroom or in one of the many industrial shops. To too many, occupational therapy means craft work and nothing more. This is unfortunate, as craft work is only one form of occupational therapy.

A great variety of the activities of normal life, namely: Amusements, study and occupations of various kinds are being used to promote contentment and satisfaction. When so employed, they are activities used therapeutically or occupational therapy. The simplicity of that particular activity matters not. Hobbies such as reading, painting, sculpturing, raising goldfish, cabinet making, wood carving, rug weaving, sewing, etc., are forms of occupational therapy and are helpful in creating happiness for even so-called normal people.

In a well worked out occupational therapy program, three individuals are to be considered. They are the patient, the occupational therapist and the physician.

Physicians are beginning to regard the patient as a partner in his own cure and to realize that the patient’s assistance and interest are important in the treatment process. We know that fundamentally some of the psychoses and the neuroses are means of side stepping responsibility and means of saving the ego, pain. We know that if a psychosis continues long enough, the patient will tend to give up reality entirely. We know that, until that time occurs, the patient has periods when he demonstrates what may be called the mechanism of “reality testing”, that is, a period when he is trying to decide between reality and phantasy. We know that, if reality can become more desirable than phantasy, the patient shows improvement; occupational therapy can help in creating that reality.

On admission the patient, if he is conscious, will realize that he is in some institution, perhaps a prison, where he may never see his friends again; where he is to be confined against his will and where he is required to follow a strange routine amongst strange people. He is deprived of his usual way of living. Because of this, he is