

## Inquiry Finds Mentally Ill Patients Endured 'Assembly Line' Surgery

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY and SARAH KERSHAW

Published: March 18, 2001

One by one, they were called down from their rooms at the home for the mentally ill in Queens and ushered into an ambulette. Over five days in January 1998, they were taken to a small hospital nearby, 24 men in all.

Once there, they were shepherded into the emergency room, many listless and disheveled, some so bewildered that they began to wander off before being stopped by nurses or guards.

There was a 72-year-old schizophrenic who had been in institutions nearly all his life and could barely dress himself. Another was a man who spent most of his time at the home staring off, a grimace etching his face. And there was one man who was more alert but who had long been terrified of hospitals.

Each man had been persuaded back at the home to sign forms consenting to surgery for an enlarged prostate, even though the condition had not been conclusively diagnosed, few seemed to understand what they had signed and none had received proper urological examinations, a state health inquiry concluded later.

Eventually, the residents of the Leben Home for Adults in Elmhurst -- some barely middle-aged, one nearly 80 -- were put under general anesthesia for an hourlong operation to shave tissue from their prostates. In most cases, they were operated on at Parkway Hospital in Forest Hills by a urologist who had never met them and did not adequately review their medical records, the inquiry showed.

It was, health officials charged, the use of "assembly-line techniques to mass-produce surgery," a series of procedures that generated tens of thousands of dollars in Medicaid and Medicare fees for the hospital and at least one doctor.

The account of the operations is emerging only now in the wake of a lawsuit brought against the home this month on behalf of the 24 residents and the state's recent decision to revoke the medical license of one urologist who arranged the surgeries and to suspend the license of another who performed them.

Both doctors have defended their conduct, as has Leben Home, which was fined \$5,000 for not properly supervising the 24 men and for other violations.

Leben Home, a for-profit facility with about 360 mentally ill residents, remains open, despite a decades-old history of unsanitary conditions, state sanctions and even macabre incidents. In 1993, for example, a decomposed body was found to have been wedged behind a basement freezer for a year.

Even amid the longstanding troubles at the home, though, the surgeries stand out, according to a review of case records and interviews with state officials and residents' relatives.

Four men were never examined by a urologist before undergoing the operations, including the 72-year-old schizophrenic, identified in the case as Patient 10, according to testimony. Before the surgeries, Leben Home did not contact relatives or guardians of the men, or their primary care doctors, even though it had previously done so for matters as minor as a dental visit, officials said.

Six of the men suffered complications from the surgery, including severe incontinence. To this day, most have no idea what happened to them.

A sister of Patient 10 said he could not even comprehend what a prostate gland was, let alone consent to the surgery.

"He's used to being in institutions," she said in an interview, speaking on condition that she and her brother not be identified. "He's been in them all his life. He does what he is told. He'll just follow you."

She said that whenever her brother had been hospitalized for treatment of cellulitis, an inflammation of the connective tissue of the skin, the home had contacted her or another brother. No one notified them about the prostate surgery, she said.

To say that Patient 10 "would be capable of signing his own permission on a form for surgery is absurd," she said.

The State Health Department inquiry into the two doctors' conduct began after an anonymous call. The department is also examining the role of Parkway Hospital in the surgeries. The state attorney general's office is investigating whether the doctors or the hospital committed Medicaid fraud.

