

Veterans Hospital Horror Stories



Jack Anderson

WHILE Christmas choirs sing about good will toward men, veterans hospitals have been turning away bruised, battered and broken veterans.

Their tragic stories fill a confidential file at the House Veterans Committee, whose staff has been conducting a 19-city survey of hospital abuses. The findings make grim Christmas reading.

An Atlanta veteran, with a drinking problem, went to the hospital for help. "For six hours we waited for a doctor to examine him," the veteran's sister told the committee. "When they finally came in, the doctor was very, very ugly to him... he didn't try to help him... two weeks to the day later, he poured gasoline through his house and on himself and struck a match. He died at the same VA hospital."

A Kansas City veteran died about a week after he had been examined. "There were no beds available," states the report cryptically.

In city after city, the survey shows that veterans were given cursory examinations or were denied treatment altogether at veterans hospitals.

★ ★ ★

WE HAVE had access to the committee's raw findings, which include names and details. To spare the veterans possible personal embarrassment, we will omit the names. But here are a few of their stories:

• — A veteran complained to the Washington, D.C., veterans hospital that he was in pain. After a 10-hour wait he

was told that he had "a slight case of diabetes and arthritis, but there was no need for hospitalization." But the report adds tersely: "He went to Freedmans Hospital and was operated on for a blocked spine."

• — In Dallas, the survey claims, a veteran went to the VA hospital, was examined and nothing was found. He then went to a private doctor who found he was bleeding internally."

• — A New York vet was refused admittance by a doctor who said he "didn't need hospital care. The next day, he was admitted to Williamsburg General Hospital and operated on for a kidney stone."

★ ★ ★

NOT ALL these reports have been evaluated. A spokesman for the Veterans Administration also pointed out to us that medical opinions differ. "The doctor does not always agree with the patient," said the spokesman. He admitted patients had been turned away who should have been treated but insisted this number "is lower in the VA than in other hospital systems." He added emphatically: "We're taking a hard look at this ourselves."

Probably the chief reason sick veterans are turned away from the hospital doors is simply a lack of funds. The White House, in effect, has impounded money voted to expand the VA hospital system.

Meanwhile, the President will get the best possible medical attention at the taxpayers' expense when he eventually checks into the Bethesda Naval Hospital for his annual medical checkup.