

Treatment of Violent Prisoners Shelved

By Norman Melnick
Science Writer

Dr. George Bach-y-Rita's brief career in psychiatry has taken him from Harvard to Vacaville and an encounter with prison reformers.

The encounter has wiped out an ambitious program proposed for the new Maximum Psychiatric Diagnostic Unit at the California Medical Facility at Vacaville. Vacaville is the psychiatric component of California's prison system.

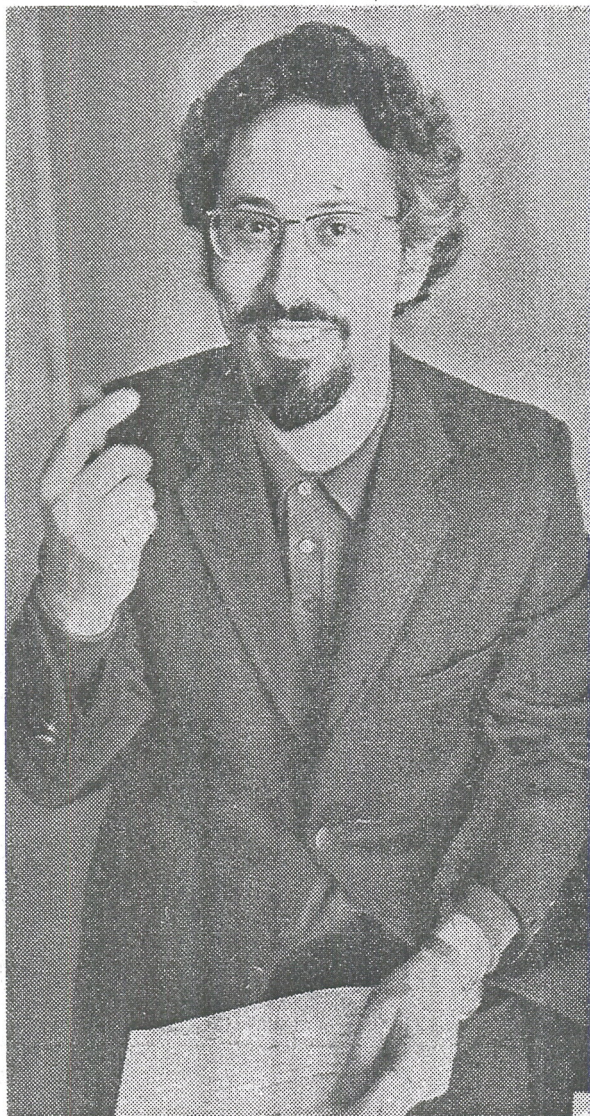
Bach-y-Rita's particular field of interest is aggressive and violent behavior, a specialty he brought with him from Harvard in 1969. It was the reason he hired on as twice-a-week psychiatrist at the new unit.

Brain Studies

What he proposed was prolonged electroencephalogram studies ("as long as 12 hours, not the usual three minutes") with computer analysis "to seek out and diagnose" prisoners with brain damage and temporal lobe epilepsy. The latter is distinguished from all other forms of epilepsy by occasional outbreaks of extreme violence.

He also proposed "batteries of tests for sensory performance and cerebellar function and studies with alpha conditioning to augment conventional therapy."

(Of four distinct brain



DR. GEORGE BACH-Y-RITA
"Certain constraints" scuttled program
—Examiner photo by Sid Tate

waves picked up by EEG, "alpha" is said to be the regulator for pleasant, tranquil states of mind.)

Protests

The project is down the drain now — all of it — because of what Bach-y-Rita terms "certain constraints."

With announcement of the new unit at Vacaville, prison reformers raised a storm. They claimed MPDU was going to be used for experimental brain surgery and for aversive drugs — drugs so powerful they can scare a man into changing his behavior. For them it raised the spectre of frontal lobotomies again — a much discredited surgical procedure now seldom used anywhere.

There is room in MPDU for 84 of the state's toughest and most belligerent convicts, including political revolutionaries.

The Department of Corrections insists that there will be no brain surgery, no aversive drugs, no electric shock treatment — only conventional "intensive" psychiatric therapy whose aim will be to return these men to the prison "mainline."

'Violent Patients'

MPDU would seem tailor-made for specialists like Bach-y-Rita. While at Harvard he was the principal investigator in an exhaustive research project titled "Episodic Dyscontrol: A Study of 130 Violent Patients."

Nowhere in the study is there any discussion of aversive drugs or psychosurgery.

Instead, the paper suggests that "the single most useful tool in the management of (violent people) has been simply the attention of a physician. . . . This proved immensely useful in averting incidents."

Pickets

Tousle-headed and bearded, Bach-y-Rita is an informal unassuming man of Italian-Spanish ancestry. Only 35, he lives in San Francisco, works in Vacaville, is a staff psychiatrist at the Marin Community Mental Health Center and is also in

private practice.

Pickets popped up recently when he was scheduled to give a lecture at the Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute here. Illness forced him to cancel the lecture.

"Prisons are the popular thing today," he says. "Some people are making their political fortunes on them."

Yet he appears to hold many of the same views as the reformers. For example, he believes that prisons have "severe shortcomings" and that "many prisoners are made worse by their experiences in prison."

"I'm personally convinced that prisons foster violence," he says. "You want to raise a vicious dog? Keep him on a short leash."

The reformers claim that Bach-y-Rita has withdrawn his project at Vacaville because he has been "educated."

The psychiatrist says he has become aware of "mitigating circumstances of an ethical nature." He says:

"The Prisoners Union (an organization of ex-convicts) approached me and asked the question, 'How ethical is it to do research in a prison?' I had to agree with them, even though I did not intend to break skin or cause anyone any pain.

"I decided that prison is not the place to do research. There is pressure on a man to acquiesce, and offering pay under conditions where a man does not have reasonable alternatives other than research is not the same as in a free society. A convict does not volunteer as a free man does."

"The thing is," Bach-y-Rita says with dismay, "the people who picket me know all this."

Reform

Dr. Richard H. Fine of the Medical Committee for Human Rights said Bach-y-Rita was hired at Vacaville "to screen prisoners for psychosurgery . . . but he has since declined."

He said the prison reform movement had been an "incredibly important" influence on Bach-y-Rita and had succeeded in "changing" his mind.

"He's an excellent person," Fine said of Bach-y-Rita.

This opinion is not shared by certain fringe groups in Berkeley whose "campaign, literally, is to break down all prisons, free everybody," according to Bach-y-Rita. When he talks, they turn out to heckle him.

Also, he says Fine is mistaken. "I surely would not

use surgery to control behavior. Absolutely not."

Bach-y-Rita says his position may have become confused "because I happen to believe there are good people in the Department of Corrections" and because of his association with Dr. John E. Adams, a highly respected neurosurgeon of the University of California Medical Center locally.

Assaultive Behavior

Before Bach-y-Rita arrived on the scene, Adams used to go to Vacaville to examine prisoners, some with histories of assaultive behavior. One time he invited Bach-y-Rita along.

In his research at Harvard, the psychiatrist had found that many patients suffered from diagnosed and undiagnosed temporal lobe epilepsy.

Adams wanted to find out how many prisoners at Vacaville suffered from this critical disorder, and he wanted Bach-y-Rita's help.

Outside Prison

Adams was convinced that surgery to removed the damaged portions of the lobes would substantially reduce the number of epileptic seizures and hence the number of violent outbreaks.

But that's out now. Bach-y-Rita intends to do his research outside prison walls with parolees — with what he terms "free hyper-aggressive men."