

Bob HUNTER

Today's guest columnist is Lanny Beckman, the prime mover behind the Mental Patients Association. Both Lanny and the MPA are experiencing overt feelings of hostility toward Dave Berner, yesterday's guest columnist, and his group, X-Kalay. I thought it would be good perverse fun to have Berner and Beckman appear back-to-back in this space. Actually, Lanny looks like Dave's freaky cousin. Or does Dave look like Lanny's straight cousin? Lanny is going to be serious . . .

Look out your window. One in three houses you see (if you're lucky enough to see houses) will be directly beset with emotional problems sufficiently serious to drive one of its members into a psychiatric ward. If you live in a working class neighborhood, the ratio is closer to one in two houses.

Perhaps your own family has been afflicted; if it hasn't yet, perhaps it will be in the future. The odds are not good that you'll escape the epidemic of emotional disturbance plaguing Canadian society.

Despite its commonness — or perhaps because of it — mental illness is one of the monsters we seem to deny most vigorously. We're afraid of states of mind that are unpredictable and extraordinary. We develop false stereotypes about mental illness that permit us to mystify the phenomenon and to keep up our guard. We create the stigma that forces us to hide what most needs to be exposed. Canada spends \$3 per person per year on military research and 10 cents on mental health research.

★
ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH the mental health situation knows that existing psychiatric facilities are pathetically inadequate. Nervous breakdowns are not one shot affairs; people don't leave hospital fully rejuvenated and prepared to cope with the outside world. Almost 70 per cent of patients admitted to psychiatric institutions have been there before. This revolving-door policy of admissions bears witness to the fact that most patients are caught up in an endless cycle that shuttles them back and forth between home and hospital. In most cases, mental institutions are just receptacles or way-stations where people with problems stay for periods of time before returning to the same set of circumstances that drove them crazy in the first place.

Certainly the solution to the

problem includes the vast reorganization and improvement of hospital facilities; the re-ordering of our moral and financial priorities so that mental health is 30 times more important — not 30 times less important — than the military.

The improvement of hospital facilities, however, is only a secondary aspect of the solution. More important, and more obvious, is the development of preventive facilities. These entail resources within the community where people can receive ongoing support before their problems become serious enough to require hospitalization.

Within the past few years, psychiatry has begun to recognize the need for preventive, community resources. However, they are being developed at a turtle's pace. Professionals are bogged down by conservative traditions and red tape. They also tend to surround emotional disturbance with an aura of voodooism and technical jargon that make solutions seem more difficult than they really are.

★

PATIENTS ARE LONELY, depressed, anxious. They need — watch out, here come some far-out concepts — love, understanding, a sense of community and belonging.

The Mental Patients Association is a non-professional group of patients and former patients attempting to build a community where emotional problems can be dealt with on a 24-hour basis before they reach unmanageable proportions.

As well as a farmhouse in Matsqui, we have a drop-in and half way house in Vancouver with 12 beds. Most of the residents are patients who have just left hospital. The immediate post-hospital period is an especially crucial time. Fifty per cent of patients who kill themselves do so within three months of discharge from hospital.

Additionally, we hope to provide contact and support for people who have completed their stay with us. We are in the process of establishing group, or co-op, homes for ex-patients leaving MPA Centre. To do this, we will require help from sympathetic landlords.

The housing issue is, for many ex-patients, literally a matter of life and death. If you have a house that will be coming up for rent any time during the next few months, please give us a call. Ask for Barry or Lanny at 738-1422.