

HOME NEWS

'Public before press' move backfires at Broadmoor tribunal

By Stewart Tendler

The first public hearing of a mental health review tribunal began inauspiciously at Broadmoor hospital, Berkshire, yesterday with many reporters being refused admission. When, after protests were made, three were allowed into the morning session, they found 11 empty seats.

Dr Patrick McGrath, the hospital's medical superintendent, said he had restricted the press because he expected more members of the public to attend. When they did not, all the reporters were allowed in for the rest of the day.

In fact, the tribunal was not advertised and no disinterested citizens were there to hear the case of an arsonist appealing for a discharge for the fourth time. Those attending were escorted to and from the hearing.

Reporters were told by the chairman, Mr J. J. Dean, a barrister, that they could report only his (Mr Dean's) name and those of the other two members of the tribunal, Mr T. C. Fleming, a psychiatrist, and Mr W. D. Charles, a justice of the peace, but not those of the patient or any witnesses or staff. Procedure could be touched on only in general terms.

Patients and parents have the right to ask for a public hearing, but none has done so before. The father of the patient, a man aged 23, said he had requested an open inquiry because he wished to get at the truth.

A solicitor appearing for the patient said the man had been convicted of arson in 1969 and sent for borstal training. A year later he was released on probation, but was recalled in 1972 and offered either further borstal training or voluntary commitment to an Isle of Wight mental hospital. He chose the latter. Later he was taken to Wernwood Scrubs prison and was then committed to Broadmoor.

The solicitor said he submitted that the man was not suffering from any psychopathic

condition and should be discharged.

The patient in his evidence said he was found guilty of a sexual assault on a girl, aged nine, when he was 13, for which he was put on nine months' probation. He left school and went to work as a trainee manager, but found he was working in the storeroom and being given conflicting jobs by his superiors.

Sent to a warehouse on an errand, he set fire to some papers "more in anger than anything else". That and other offences like telephone hoax calls were "my own way of getting back at society". He had hoped to join the Forces or the police but was rejected because of his earlier conviction.

Since he had been in Broadmoor, his anger had quietened down. "I do explode verbally, but when you are living in a top security place like this you have to accept that", he said.

When he was on probation, a probation worker accused him of trying to rape his grandmother, aged 86, but that was not true; it was just an argument over a pair of socks wrongly given to him by his grandmother as a Christmas present.

Questioned by the chairman, the patient denied bursting into his grandmother's house, undressing and pushing her on the bed and trying to rape her.

The patient's parents both gave evidence that the grandmother had told neither of them of the incident. They did not believe there had ever been any attempted rape.

They both felt their son should be released from Broadmoor but in a sense he was still being punished for being an arsonist.

The Broadmoor doctor treating the patient told the tribunal that it had been hoped to move him to a normal mental hospital, but none would take him. He did not feel that the man was ready to be released into normal society.

The hearing continues today.