

130-year-old tradition of health services for the inner city

When the Civil War began in 1861, Union soldiers poured in from the battlefields. By streetcar and train, they came for treatment of gunshot wounds, sunstroke, malnutrition, and gastro-intestinal diseases. Some arrived weighing only 60 pounds and full of fever and scurvy. "The sufferings of these poor soldiers during the ... war can never be told," Sister Hieronymo, the order's superior, is recorded to have said.

Although the government subsidized St. Mary's for treating servicemen, conditions were rugged in the early years. When the number of soldier patients rose to 700 at one time, provisions were made in the corridors and in tents outside. Civilians were moved to rented quarters across the street.

Although the sisters numbered as many as 23 at one point, laywomen have donated their time and goods to St. Mary's from the beginning. One of the earliest was Miss Sarah Cawthra, who nursed soldiers and raised \$17,000 by her own efforts for the hospital building fund. 1905 marked the founding of the Society of Seton Workers, which today numbers 730 volunteers who give direct service at St. Mary's in addition to raising funds.

In his book "St. Mary's and the Civil War," diocesan historian Father Robert F. McNamara recounts a particularly severe winter when smallpox tested the sisters' faith. Victims of this highly-contagious disease were hurried off to isolation. Fearing the public's reaction if news reached the city, the sisters decided to keep the infection secret.

"The observance of St. Patrick's Day ... threatened (the sisters') prudent secrecy," wrote Father McNamara, "since it was customary for the big Rochester St. Patrick's parade to march

into the military hospital and regale the patients with music and song ... Sister Hieronymo sent another Sister of Charity to the approaching procession to assure them, without further explanations, that the soldiers were too sick at the moment to be entertained. Meanwhile Sister Hieronymo fell on her knees and prayed fervently to the day's patron saint. 'St. Patrick, she pleaded, 'if you did for Ireland all they say you did, banish the smallpox from this institution!'

"The prayer was answered, and there were no further cases of the disease. But when Sister Hieronymo later recounted the whole episode to Bishop Timon, the bishop replied with a smile, 'I wonder that St. Patrick heard you at all when you used the word "if" to him!'

Today's mission

A visitor from the Civil War period would find few remaining vestiges of the early St. Mary's. The wheatfields that surrounded the stables have become a struggling inner-city neighborhood, and the 1200-member staff now includes only seven Daughters of Charity.

But the mission remains unchanged. "We're Rochester's oldest hospital — seven years older than Rochester General — yet we're also the newest," said Patrick Madden, president of the hospital. "Our renovation demonstrated that our commitment to this neighborhood is stronger than ever."

St. Mary's made the decision to stay on Genesee Street at a time when other hospitals around the country were moving to the suburbs, he continued. "Such a move would have made it easier financially — suburban patients are more likely to pay for treatment — but would have been out of character with our

commitment to the poor. In 1986 alone, we devoted \$3 million to indigent care."

In recent years, the staff has been challenged by image problems and financial constraints. At present, only 65 percent of the hospital's 276 beds are occupied, leaving vacant space on half of two floors.

"People still perceive us as putting four patients to a room, with peeling paint on the wall," said Madden. "They don't realize that part of our goal in serving the poor is to provide for them the same quality of care anybody else will receive. Once people set foot in St. Mary's they love the facility and the care they receive."

The image problem has affected the medical staff, too. "A number of years ago, we couldn't get private attending physicians to serve here," said Madden, "so we instituted the family health associates — physicians who are paid by the hospital."

This plan, coupled with St. Mary's affiliation with the University of Rochester as a teaching hospital, assures patients of expert professional care.

The quiet, well-tended homes in the neighborhood don't attract much attention. The area is better known for a pit bull attack that made the news in August and a boarded-up bar called "The Hottest Spot in Town." The statue of the Virgin outside St. Mary's stands in mute testimony to the challenges facing an urban hospital — her hands outstretched in service have been broken off by vandals.

Despite these blights, there are signs of hope. Since St. Mary's completed its renovations, the adjacent Bull's Head Plaza likewise has undergone a major transformation. "It used to be full of vacant stores with broken windows and

graffiti," said Mary Loewenguth, assistant director of public relations at the hospital. "Now its tenants include the Department of Social Services, a police station, Rite-Aid and the DePaul Clinic and the Martin Luther King Center." This spring, Sister Kinnarney visited about 100 homes, distributing directories for the Nineteenth Ward association. "I feel we should be good neighbors as well as providing health care," she said.

By January, Madden anticipates, the hospital will increase its occupancy through a new plan to recertify 75 beds to provide a hospice, a neuro-rehab center and a skilled-nursing facility.

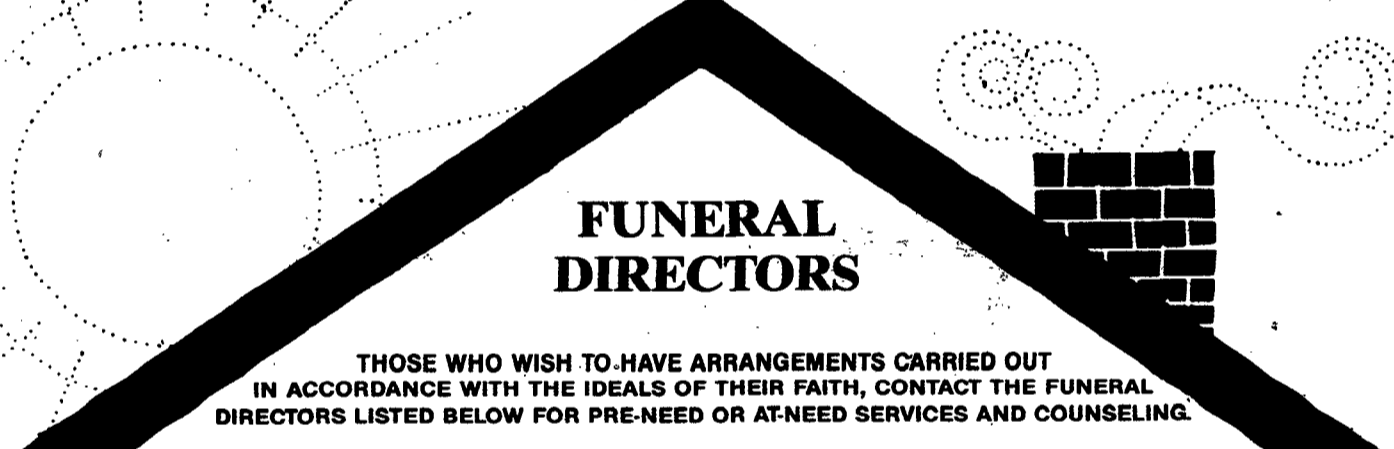
These and other innovations at St. Mary's stem from the facility's mission as well as from changes in government reimbursement to hospitals, which have encouraged reductions in inpatient services and increased outpatient services.

Consumers, too, have reacted favorably toward the 1986 introduction of centers for oral health, cardiac rehabilitation, eye care and outpatient vascular X-rays. Many of these unique services attract paying patients who make it possible to balance the budget.

St. Mary's emergency center, now called Express Care, promises that each incoming patient will be assessed immediately by a registered nurse. Minor injuries and illnesses are quickly attended to, though serious ones are still referred to the emergency center. "A lot of folks have used our emergency room in place of a private physician," said Madden. "Express Care's prompt treatment is a crucial part of our response to the community."

St. Mary style

As institutions grow older, they often lose
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SOUND ADVICE



By: John Crandall —
Hearing Aid Specialist


Portable stereos using small head phones have become quite popular but can easily produce sound levels loud enough to damage hearing. Thus, one should be cautious not to turn them up "too loud."

The correct medical term for "ear-drum" is tympanic membrane. The term "tympanic" actually means "drumhead" which describes its shape and function. The term "membrane" means "thin layer of organic tissue." Thus, the tympanic membrane is a thin layer of skin at the end of the ear canal that looks and acts like a drumhead.

Question — I have a hearing problem in both ears, does that mean I will have to wear two hearing aids?

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