

Medicine: Mound Bayou's Crisis

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Nestled among the cotton and soybean fields of Mississippi's table-flat Bolivar County, the tiny (pop. 2,100) all black city of Mound Bayou has few stores, little in the way of employment, and even less for the diversion of its residents. But Mound Bayou does have one civic asset: the Delta Community Hospital and Health Center Inc., a black-run medical complex that provides the people of Bolivar and neighboring counties with first-rate health care regardless of their ability to pay. Mound Bayou may not have its prized institution much longer. The federal aid necessary to keep the hospital going will end early next year, and unless some other sources of support can be found, the hospital may be forced to turn away patients, most of whom have nowhere else to go.

Mound Bayou's community hospital owes its existence to P.M. Smith, head of a black fraternal organization called the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor. Appalled by the primitive and inadequate hospital facilities for blacks in the area, Smith used money originally earmarked for one of his organization's temples to build the Mound Bayou hospital in 1942.

For more than two decades, the fraternal order was the chief backer of the hospital. But then Mound Bayou got some help from Washington. In 1967 the Office of Economic Opportunity gave Tufts University funds to establish a community health center half a mile from the hospital. The center began referring its patients to the institution, and by 1972 more than \$5.5 million worth of OEO funds, mainly in salaries, were being put into the area's faltering economy.

Death Rate. The health dividends from the federal investment were even greater. Delta blacks had long been plagued by many poverty-related ailments, from iron-deficiency anemia to parasitic infections like hookworm. The hospital alone could not significantly reduce the incidence of these ailments, but it did help those who came to it. Although the death rate for babies born in the region is more than 35 per 1,000 live births (among the nation's highest), there were only five deaths among the 1,047 babies born last year at Mound Bayou's community hospital.

White politicians paid little attention to Mound Bayou's hospital while it was struggling along on its own. Once the hospital and medical center began receiving regular federal funds, they became interested. Local officials tried to take over the Mound Bayou program—and its funding—but failed. State agencies attempted to rescind the hospital's license on the ground that it failed to meet state standards. They were stymied when Mound Bayou obtained OEO funds to renovate some of its most outmoded facilities.

Mound Bayou's latest trials began in 1973, when the Nixon Administration dismantled OEO and transferred its health-services program to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which lacks the statutory authority to finance the hospital. HEW will continue to fund the outpatient programs conducted at Mound Bayou's health center. But the money to support the hospital is being cut off. By next June, all financial aid will end.

Dr. H. Jack Geiger, professor of community medicine at the State University of New York at Stonybrook, who helped found the medical center, believes that the hospital is too old and poorly equipped to provide quality care. Local officials, and even the hospital staff, agree that the hospital is obsolete but insist nonetheless that it is essential. Other, white-run hospitals in the area will not admit indigent blacks. Thus, unless these patients can continue to get free care at Mound Bayou's hospital, most will get no care at all.