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Pat Lynch interview, 2/8/94

PAT LYNCH: ...and so they were so starved, we couldn't give them any medication. You couldn't use the hypo because there was no place

[INTERRUPTION]

PAT LYNCH: We were in an evacuation hospital close by. I was in a small hospital it moved a lot. And this was probably one of the subcamps. We'd been to Rhine first and then we moved around, moved on down south, and this was a subcamp. There were a few of us who went over there, because we couldn't, not all the nurses and doctors could go because we had, somebody had to take care of our patients at our hospital, so they'd take a few each day and go over and it was just terrible. I couldn't believe it. Absolutely. I stood there for a while, and some of the girls walked out, and I thought to myself, if I walk out I'm not getting back in here, I've got to stay. I can't walk out. They walked out and made a circle around and came back in. So I [sighs] oh, am I gonna be able to this, and I thought, for a little while, I don't think I can do this, and then I got busy and started in working.

SWB: How did it compare to what you had been doing.

PAT LYNCH: Oh, no comparison at all.

SWB: Tell me. I've never been in one of those... I don't even know what, you were saving men who were wounded... so tell me the contrast.

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PAT LYNCH: Oh, well, first, our patients had the best of care, and they weren't neglected, I mean, even though we were out in the field, we did everything we could for them, and we were kind to them. But here we go in this place where these people have been abused. And they didn't have medical care, they didn't have anything. And it was a real sharp contrast. While we didn't have the best of equipment, we had the best that we could have out in the field hospital. But they were fed and we took good care of them, then we go someplace where people had no care at all, nobody cared for them, no one was interested in them, and they were just lying on concrete, some of them, with temperatures of

108. And they hadn't been fed. They had some wooden rolls about so big around with some soup in, and I noticed that particularly and the patients were too weak to reach over and get it. That was the only pretense that they made of feeding them. And uh, they were so thin. I couldn't pick any of them up, I tried to, but if I really picked them up I would tear the skin. So we had to be very very careful moving them out. The skin was just so terrible. So it would take, about, at least three people, one person take the head, one person take the legs, and very carefully lift them up and get them outside, go ahead and get them outside of that place. We put up tents outside, we had cots and clean bedding. So we'd take them out there. Or if there was a hospital nearby, we'd go and take over that hospital and move them in there. But, uh, we couldn't, for typhus, that was the main thing, there was no medication, just supportive treatment, and get fluids down them, well they couldn't drink anything, so we had to feed them with medicine droppers, and we couldn't give them hypos because there was no place to stick them. There was no skin at all,

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no muscle, just skin and bone, there was no place to give them a hypo. So, it was, I was just weak, I couldn't believe it happened. And then I was so afraid, I thought, what else are we gonna run into. Is this gonna go on? And then, later on, I think we were all just infuriated, and outraged at what had happened. But right in the beginning we were so afraid, first we didn't believe it.

SWB: How many-- What were the numbers like, that you were confronted with. How many of you were there and how many people were you trying to help?

PAT LYNCH: Oh, see, those that were able to be moved, now they went to DP camps from the concentration camps. And if they were able to be moved, they hurried up and moved them over there, and I don't know what the DP camps were, whether they were buildings, or to me it sounded like they were camps, outdoors someplace. But nevertheless, they were much better than what they had. And so they moved those, and those that were really too sick to move, we had to find a building, or put a tent up outside. We had to get them out of the camps, it was too dirty in there. And so we put tents up, and we knew how to run a hospital under tents because that's what we'd been doing. The evacuation hospital that I was with was all tents. Even surgery. So we knew how to run a hospital under tents. So we put the up, put tents outside and got clean bedding for them, and they were bathed, and took care of them there, until we could move them someplace else. But mainly to get them out

of those buildings, they were just terrible. They were infested with mites, and oh, just awful. If they didn't have typhus, well they'd get it if they didn't get out.

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SWB: How did you guys protect yourselves?

PAT LYNCH: Oh we had, I'd had training in communicable diseases, that's what I did, and that's one reason they sent me there. Because I'd had some training in communicable diseases. We had DDT powder that we used, and it was in a thing that looks like an old flint gun, you know, they used to spray flies, we had a canister with a pump on it, so we put the powder and then we would stick it down our slacks and socks and under our arms, and get inside of our fatigues. I don't know what we did about our hair. That's one thing I've been trying to figure out how did we, we must have dusted some kind of a cap, and then put that on, or maybe we had a, we may have tied it up with a cloth, dusted the cloth and then tied our hair up, because if the mite would get on us, we'd get it too. So, that's about the only

thing that we did, that I remember, and try to get as much rest as we could, of course that wasn't very easy because we'd been working sixteen hours a day, but keep well rested. Our food wasn't very good. It was K rations and C rations, no fresh fruit, no milk. No fresh potatoes, no vegetables. Everything was powdered. I never had any fruit all the time I was there, no milk. But anyway we managed to stay healthy. Where these people hadn't had anything to eat except bread crusts and coffee grounds. Our general health was good, our resistance was good, so that's probably what kept us from getting it.

SWB: Were things well organized, or was it pretty chaotic, and how did you see light at the end of the tunnel, or did you ever?

PAT LYNCH: I thought that when they got organized, it was

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pretty well organized, because all the leaders came forth, among the people in the camps, the survivors, the leaders all came forth and helped out. See, we didn't get there

first, the American soldiers got there first, so the soldiers and the people in the camps started running the camps, and I thought they did pretty well. And then they recruited German people to do the laundry, to do the cooking, to clean, and do all sorts of things. So, pretty soon it was, things were going pretty well. It was a matter of just taking care of these desperately ill patients. And then we started getting better supplies. Also, after we took over a town, after the infantry or tank corps got in there, they'd go to the burgermeister of the town and tell him what we needed. So they just, said we need so many beds and need so much clean linen, we brought what we had, what we could spare from our hospital, but we did tell him what we want, and they'd hurry up and find it. So, in that way, it wasn't too bad. It was primitive, but we got by, I'll say.

SWB: What was the attitude of the Germans that helped?

PAT LYNCH: They hung on to us and hugged us like they thought we were gonna go away. Oh, the German people, oh not this, excuse me, oh, they were very submissive for the most part. They were very cooperative. And then the burgermeister would send whatever we wanted, if he possibly could find it, of course [??????] with the German efficiency, go find it, get what we need. But as far as the survivors were concerned, they just hung to us, those that could, many of them were too weak, they couldn't lift their arms up. They hung on to us and grabbed our clothes for

fear we're gonna leave. But, no, the people who came in to

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work, for the most part, were cooperative. They probably didn't want to be there, but they, it was only one nurse that I didn't get along with, at one hospital we had taken over, and we had taken the survivors in there. And she was a little abrupt. She's a good nurse, German nurse, but she was abrupt, and she would, I'd hear her talking to the patients, she'd say 'Swallow that,' 'Drink that,' kind of barking at them so I took her aside and told her she'd have to be more caring. I said, you can't talk to these peo-, those people that way. Well, she didn't like me very well, so every time she went by me she'd give me a dirty look. Otherwise, I got along fine. There was another nurse there, her name was Margaret, and I got along fine with her. She was a little bit older. The people we had the trouble with were the Hitler youth, the young ones. They were starting up again. And some of our officers and our men found them out in a cemetery, starting up all over again, marching around, Heil Hitler, so, I don't know what they did, and I guess they call the MP's and told them to take them on home.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2 TAKE 2]

SWB: I want you to start again and tell me about the Hitler Youth and tell me about the difference in the older German people who had to help out and the younger ones.

PAT LYNCH: I think the older Germans, if they were telling the truth, they told us that they didn't want to be Nazis and they were afraid and they had to go along with him or they'd have been killed. But the Hitler youth, they were very bold, and I think they, I was really afraid of them.

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After the war was over and we could ride around, maybe go, we couldn't go anyplace before without an armed escort. And of course the doctors weren't armed, we had to find somebody if we wanted to go to another little town if we wanted to visit a friend or something, we had to find an armed escort to go with us, but I was always afraid of that Hitler youth

group, because I don't think they'd stop at anything. And they were having a demonstrations at night, they'd find them in cemeteries and places. And carrying on. They were starting up again. And see they were about twelve years, from twelve years on, so, I... they just call the MP's and tell them to take them home, or what they did with them. But our doctors found the few times, I'm a little scared of them.

SWB: What about, were the German people surprised by, you know you were shocked and didn't believe what you saw. What about the Germans.

PAT LYNCH: Oh, they said that they didn't, now, now, they say they didn't know that it was going on, but... They just didn't say too much of anything. They just went about their work. But I'm sure they knew what was going on, they were probably in there helping. And the German citizens probably were in there. I always thought they were probably in there helping.

SWB: What about, did you, did the townspeople have to bury some of the people, tell me in detail about that.

PAT LYNCH: Uh, the soldiers told them that they would have to bury these people and give them a decent burial with the star of David and all. I happened to be going through a

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little village one day and I saw these ladies carrying the caskets. And they did look remorseful, with dark circles under their eyes, and dressed in black, they looked pretty sad. There weren't too many of them because, well, I wouldn't say there weren't more than 30 or 40 that I saw, walking along to the cemetery, carrying the caskets, but our soldiers made them do that. They probably didn't want to, but I think that's the only time I saw them look a little bit remorseful.

SWB: Did you talk to some of the survivors that you helped? Tell me what you remember of that.

PAT LYNCH: Oh, they just hang on to us and grab us, they didn't want us to leave, and then they were going to the, some that were going to the DP camps, I remember one group going, and uh, we did all sorts of things for them that day, I helped one man, or maybe several, their feet were just cut up something terrible. They wore wooden shoes, so I bandaged them all up and put socks on them, and all other things. They had sore throats and whatever and they went to get in this, the truck or ambulances, and they were all

crying. Then I said, where you're going, they'll be nice to you too. And, uh, they were so grateful. I'll never forget they were saying auf wiedersehen, auf wiedersehen, crying as they left. I said well they'll be real nice to you in the camps, and if you get sick, if anything happens, if they can't take care of you, they'll send you back to our hospital which was 123rd evac. We'd be set up and they'll bring you back there if anything happens and that's what they did. See later on, this typhus, I thought the typhus epidemic was pretty well under control towards summer and it wasn't. And uh, we were back at our hospital and we had

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gotten into a permanent building by that time, because we were generally in tents. And we were getting an awful lot of people from the DP camps in, with typhus, and uh, I thought by that time the epidemic was under control.

SWB: Tell me how you dealt with this personally. I mean, did you feel guilt, you must have been a young women, healthy and, tell me how you felt.

PAT LYNCH: I felt very guilty, because I thought, here I

am, well, why did we let this happen? Why didn't somebody stop it, we all, you know, we should have put a stop to it and nobody did, and then I felt like, here I am living over in a tent, and I don't, and we, with the minimum, eating C rations and K rations, but if I get sick, somebody's going to take care of me, I'm gonna be treated nice. Where those people were treated so terrible. And I felt guilty, here, I'll always be taken care of, but look what's happened to them, they're so disgraceful. We had a lot of guilt feelings. Why did we survive, and... why are we treated so well, and here these people have nothing, they're starving. We certainly didn't have very much but we had a lot better than what they had. And uh, I think the guilt was why in the world did anyone let this happen. We just couldn't believe it.

SWB: Did you pray?

PAT LYNCH: Oh, I guess. I'm still wearing my St. Jude medal. I prayed all the time. St. Jude is my patron saint and I said.. well I can pull it out.. well I said if I can save some of these patients, I'll wear this St. Jude medal and I'll still be alive, so here it is. I prayed all the time, and I carried the St. Jude, St. Jude is the saint of

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hopeless cases in our church. And so I had the little card and I carried that all the time. In fact I still have one in my purse, it's a new one. The other one is all dog eared. We all prayed.

SWB: Tell me again what you had to deal with medically with these people. Describe it to me, thinking that I'm not a nurse, how difficult it was to get an IV started, for example...

PAT LYNCH: Well, starting IV's was almost impossible, because here they were starving, and if you start shooting fluid in, it would be just a little bit too much in the heart and lungs, you know, start shooting all that in them, here they... they hadn't, they couldn't even swallow, but we started IV's very very carefully, and very slowly, but we fed them with medicine droppers, and I tried to prop them up, and if you give them a little piece of a cracker or something, that wouldn't go down. And uh, they hadn't swallowed anything for so long, but, I used to rup this way, give them a little bit on a spoon, of a little fluid, and then rub this way, and, and then finally get it, get them to swallow it, but uh. They had big old bowls of, I don't know what, some kind of soup, sitting around, like the pretense of feeding them, big old wooden bowls and a big tablespoon.

Well they were too weak to reach over and pick up that spoon, and they couldn't get it in their mouth anyway, cause their mouth was just kind of set and drawn, and so they couldn't have opened their mouth to eat whatever this, I think it had been there about three days, it was just terrible. But, they had this food sit, this soup or whatever, under the pretense of having fed them. See most of them weren't getting anything but, uh, um, old crust of

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bread every day. The people who were going out work got a crust of bread and some coffee grounds, and they'd try and save a little bit of bread for the next day. I don't know how they worked.

SWB: Now, why don't you tell me about the one woman in charge of the camp that you got to see that time.

PAT LYNCH: Oh, she was terrible, I'll never forget her. They, I used to get her because of the people from the, see the soldiers, the German soldiers in the camps and the people that were running the camp, they knew that the

Americans were coming pretty soon. They were figured that out. So they just took off to the villages. Well then the survivors in the camp kind of took over and then when the American soldiers got there, well between the American soldiers and the survivors, they were running the camps. But they got this woman and put her up on the third floor in a cell. This was in Rhine. And that place was more like a jail. It had catwalks and little tiny cells but they're more like, they looked like animal cages to me. But they had her up there, locked, and she was just terrible. Worst looking thing I have ever seen. Mean, and so she would be tried for war crimes of course. But they couldn't wait to get us up there to see her. They said, don't you want to see her, I said well I can't right now but before the day is over I'll go up and see her. And the man who was in charge there was from Holland. He knew nothing about his family, he had daughters and his wife, but he said he had no idea where they were. And he had kind of taken over and uh, he spoke beautiful English, and uh, so he came around several times that day I was working, and said, don't you want to go upstairs, and I said, well, when I'm through I'll, I'm gonna

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go up and see her, that's for sure. Well I had nightmares about her for a long time. I talked to other soldiers after that, and one in particular, a fellow from our town, he just died, but he had gone into Buchenwald and the nurses didn't go in there, they said, I heard that they said it was just so terrible they couldn't let us go in there. But he said, the women in charge of the camps were worse than the men. He'd been in several and been in some of the subcamps, and he managed to see some of these women. He said they were worse than the men. They were meaner. And oh she was mean looking. Just terrible.

SWB: Did you see any survivors have reunions with other people they knew or family members?

PAT LYNCH: Not really, I didn't um, they were having a hard time finding their family members. So many of them had been killed, and uh, I didn't, after they left there I didn't see too much of them unless they got sick again, and then they came back to our hospital that following summer. And they came back with typhus, and tuberculosis, and oh any number of things. We even had maternity cases where we set up a maternity ward. Some of the people were pregnant when they went to DP camps and then they brought them over to our hospital to deliver the babies. And uh, so I got to see them again. And spend more time with them, I wasn't so busy then so I got to spend a little more time with them. There were a lot of ladies in, they came in with typhus. One

beautiful gal, she was so pretty, she was a Jewish doctor, and she had tuberculosis, oh she was a very young, just beautiful, and I took care of her for a long time. There was a ... later on they were giving streptomycin for tuberculosis but we didn't have it then so it was just

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supportive treatment. But she was a nice lady.

SWB: Okay, we just ran out.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: ...at the time when the small group of you went into the subcamp of Dachau, and tell me what a typical day was like. Start in the morning and just go...

PAT LYNCH: Start in the morning, first of all you try to, get, many of the patients were dead, and of course, they were removing them, you know, right away, and we'd try to

get the sickest ones first, get them cleaned up and get them outside, get them out of bed. And take care of them. And if there's any way that they had any flesh at all under the skin, we'd inject water, they call it hyperdemoclasia, sometimes in the shoulder there'd be a little fatty tissue there, muscle, then we'd inject some water into them because they were all dehydrated. And uh, trying to feed them, and uh, did I tell you about the men, those people whose feet were so terribly bad, they were all but up, they wore wooden shoes and no stockings, well there were a lot of people whose feet were just terrible, so we took care of those. And uh, oh, and bandaged them up and put A&D ointment or whatever I could find on them, and little two by four bandages, and get clean socks on them, and uh. But taking care of these patients who hadn't, were starving, and had typhus. There wasn't any specific medication for typhus so we'd just use supportive treatment. We concocted some kind of, all we had was powdered milk and some uh a can of

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vegetables, and so the fellows in the mess hall would try to make some real, oh some kind of soup. They'd put the

vegetables in the powdered milk and they'd try to feed them that. But if we'd get water down them, and uh, get the temperature down, that was the important thing. Cause there was nothing specific for typhus at that time.

SWB: How could they be alive with a temperature that high?

PAT LYNCH: I don't know, I don't know how they... sometimes they were just on concrete floor, you just go in there and find them lying on the concrete. I don't know how they survived. Well, many didn't, of course. But some we were able to help.

SWB: Do you know about the, um, the overeating and people dying from overeating when the camps were open, did you see any?

PAT LYNCH: I heard about it, the GI's, of course the GI's always had a candy bar someplace and they want to be kind, and these people who were up and around but hadn't had much to eat but they were still able to walk around, they were working, well they gave them candy bars and they got very sick. They just couldn't handle the sugar. I had just heard about after I went over two years ago, how they gave them candy bars, and it just about killed them.

SWB: When you're starved like that, as a nurse, what is the description, the scientific description of what happens to your body when you don't, when you're starved like that.

PAT LYNCH: Oh, they just can't possibly eat anything, it

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just won't go down, everything's, you know, if they haven't eaten anything or swallowed anything, you just can't handle it, and the skin dries up, the dehydration, and uh, just all sorts of complications from starvation. The eyes were all sunken in, and uh, terribly thin, just skin and bones. But you try and get them to eat, it was just terrible. You know they just could not swallow things. So we used the medicine droppers, little by little they started to improve, but the skin gets so terrible, no nutrition, the skin is terrible, and break out in rashes, and then, they said, you know, you couldn't lift them up because if I'd go like so, I'd tear their skin. It was in such terrible condition. But they were about as close to dead as anyone could be.

SWB: Tell me about a small incident that you remember, maybe an individual incident with somebody who touched you in some way. Did you have any personal incidents?

PAT LYNCH: Oh yeah, they would grab onto us like they though we were going to leave. One man was, I had taken care of and he was going to the DP camp. He was able to walk around, he'd been working, but oh his had lesions all over him and his feet was so bad, and his, he cried when he left, he was saying auf wiedersehen, auf wiedersehen, and I said, well they'll be nice to you when you get over there, and you'll get along fine. He didn't want to leave, he thought he'd rather stay there with the American nurses. I said well if you get real sick they'll send you back to our hospital anyway. I hadn't been to the DP camp but I said I know that they'll be nice to you. You'll get food and you'll get treated well, but he was leaving and crying. It was sad.

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SWB: Now let's jump forward to when people came in from the DP camps, and you even had maternity cases. Do you remember seeing any instance, were the people joyous, were they totally different than they had been before?

PAT LYNCH: Well, not too joyous. But they were looking better, they had started to eat, and they looked much better. And uh, they were glad to see us, they were glad to come into our hospital, and uh, I thought that they looked much better, they looked like they'd been eating and put on a little bit of weight. Well I remember going back to Rhine, the first camp I was in, and we put patients, I think there must have been a staff room where the soldiers lived, or, I don't know, a dining room or, we put a lot of them down there and set up a hospital. And went I went back two or three months later they looked so much different, you wouldn't believe it. They had changed a lot. By that time, they were eating and their color was good, and they were laughing, and, they were too sick to be out of bed, they'd had, had typhus and they were much too sick, but, they looked much different.

SWB: So you saw a huge change in those months between March and say August.

PAT LYNCH: Oh yeah, definitely.

SWB: Tell me about that. How did it make you feel?

PAT LYNCH: Oh it made me feel marvelous, it was so rewarding. It was the most rewarding thing I've ever done. We did, you know we were able to do something for those people. And uh, one regret that I have that I didn't, I was

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just so busy I couldn't stop and talk to them sometimes if I could just, stopped and held their hand or asked them a name or something, but we were just going so fast we didn't have time to talk to them. I always think about I wish I knew who some of them were. And, but I do, think about that a lot. And I wish I'd spent just a little more time but I didn't, I couldn't.

SWB: How long hours did you work?

PAT LYNCH: Oh, we weren't supposed to work more than sixteen, but, or twelve, but I think that was about the limit. We had a pretty strict rule on that. Because if, our chief nurse said if we got sick, well then we'd be no value to her, we'd just, be, more or less of a burden on her, so she expect, she wanted us to sleep eight hours in 24, not to just stay on duty 24 hours a day but sometimes we stayed longer than that. That's the only thing I was ever reprimanded for. She came around one morning and said how, she goes to me and says, how come. And I said I just can't leave, it was too much work to do. And she says well you'll

have to leave, she says I'll stay here, and I said, well I haven't charted things, I've got to get these things charted, the patients have a little envelope with a card on them, and we put, it wasn't a chart like in the hospital, we just jotted down when they'd had penicillin and morphine and whatever. And she says, well I'll take care of that. But you have got to go. So that's the only time I was ever reprimanded for anything. Staying on duty too long. Nobody wanted to go, actually, that was hard. They didn't, if there was work to do they didn't want to leave, under stress people always work much harder. And uh, they didn't want to go off duty, they could see too many things to be done.

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SWB: So you got up at dawn, and...

PAT LYNCH: Generally, we were up at six and uh, had breakfast and were on duty at seven, and uh, we worked from seven to seven, and the night nurse would come from seven and work till seven the next morning. But there were many times that we, we couldn't possibly leave at seven at night

because there was too much to be done. Or we'd have a load of new patients come in, a lot of casualties, a lot of surgery. So we just had to stay there. But the rule was sixteen hours, and we were supposed to quit.

SWB: Okay, I hear a jet, let's cut. I think I've done...

[CUT]

PAT LYNCH: ... and uh, that's about all I know about it. I think there's probably some more specific treatment now, but at that time there wasn't much that we could do for them. Just supportive treatment. This high fever, severe headache, and sometimes rash. And of course they couldn't eat, they'd starved them anyway, but when we got there it was terribly hard for them to eat. And many of them died. That was the main cause of death in the camps. That and tuberculosis. Cause the mites got started, got in there and, they were just all over. They slept on old, like, burlap bags stuffed with straw. So you can imagine that was full of the bugs. And uh, there just wasn't much chance. The children died of it.

SWB: Did you see children?

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PAT LYNCH: I saw a few. Not as many, people have asked me that, I didn't see too many children. I saw them at Rhine because they were doing the test there, a, for a diagnose, a diagnostic test for typhus. And there were children around there and I remember one of our doctors was playing with the children, ...this little girl and say, pat her on the head and say, have you had the brump test today, and, they were using the brump test to diagnose it. And I saw quite a few children there. And I don't know if they had come in or they'd brought them in from someplace or if they were, hospitalized there in another building. But they were around.

SWB: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much. END

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.