

The Lesson Of Willowbrook

Big streamer headlines last week appeared all over New York State, the substance of them being that a child at Willowbrook State School had been maltreated. The implication was that such treatment is quite general in institutions for retarded children. Public confidence in the work of the State's employees, and in one of the most humane programs of government, was rudely shaken.

That the charges were error, fraud, and phony, the employees of the institution themselves made clear at a protest meeting.

Now comes another headline: "HARRIMAN ASKED TO PROBE DEATH OF GIRL, 8, IN S. I. STATE SCHOOL."

The attack on public employees is not often the result of knowledge. Sensational headlines attacking them are not often borne out by an investigation of the facts. This was conclusively shown in the case of the "bruised" child whose publicity left the employees themselves to gather for the protection of their good name and the good name of their institution.

Inevitably, as in any undertaking, there will be occasional cases of inefficiency or worse in public agencies. But the quality of service is on an amazingly high level. Brutality such as is implied in the recent rash of headlines is a rarity; it is just not tolerated. The opposite is the truth: employees devoting themselves to hard, harsh, often dismal jobs; saving lives and bringing health to citizens who would have died or been buried in dark closets a few years ago. The great new programs of research, the use of such tranquilizing drugs as thorazine, the ingenuity in feeding retarded children who refuse food, the stanchness of work within a set of conditions that are not duplicated in any other human activity—about these things and the dedication that often goes with the job, the citizen hears nothing.

The case history of what happened at Willowbrook is an important lesson. It is part of a great recent tragedy—the undermining of confidence in public employment. The Willowbrook employees acted with strength and integrity when they "stood up" for themselves and their institution. They should feel secure in the loud backing of their employees, of the Mental Hygiene Department, and of the Governor.

In fact, the Willowbrook incident points up a lesson which the Governor might well consider: the need for a public relations program to inform the people of New York State about the great undertakings which are in operation for their health, safety, protection, and welfare; and about the employees who carry out these tremendous objectives. Such a program should include the throwing open of institutions to public inspection, so that the citizen may see for himself what is going on. It should include conveying, through all the media of communication, the problems being faced, and how they are being solved. Only in this way can the harm that comes out of headlines, implying brutality, corruption, and inefficiency, be combated.

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Child Patient Dies in Crib

Margie Dung Sit of 589-10th street, Manhattan, a four-year-old patient in Willowbrook State School, Sunday night was found dead in her crib.

Dr. Harold H. Berman, director, reported to police that the child had been found dead by Loretta Aleski, an attendant, at 7:45 P.M.

The child, he said, was last seen alive at 6:22 P.M. by Helen Montani, another attendant.

Dr. Berman reported the death to Dr. Gertrude H. Wilbur, associate medical examiner.