

# Retiring Willowbrook Chief's Goal: Treat Every Patient as an Individual

By FRED E. WEISS

For 38 years Harold H. Berman, M.D., has been working toward a single goal. His aim has been to break spasticity in the mentally retarded so that "the kids are free to gain."

At the end of the year, Dr. Berman will bid farewell to the 6,300 "kids" that were under his supervision at the big institution for the mentally retarded, Willowbrook State School.

Perhaps it is their mental ages that causes Dr. Berman to refer to the patients as "kids." But surely, the hundreds of Willowbrook staff members, community representatives and fellow-physicians who honored the retiring director Saturday night at a dinner-dance at the school know that each patient meant something to their boss.

Since there are some 40 or 50 types and degrees of mental deficiency, Dr. Berman says that each patient at Willowbrook

are mentally retarded, men like Dr. Berman, and institutions like Willowbrook are battling to reduce the number and rehabilitate the afflicted.

"WE DISREGARD the IQ," Dr. Berman says. "All it tells is the least the patient has. What we do is relax the spastic and train."

"Because of the training

with repetition there are few bedridden patients. The so-called educatable is trained to socialize; exist in society. We deemphasize book learning. We repeat that red is different from green; the number three from five, and ladies from men.

"Once trained the patient can exist in society and be returned to his family. Often the patient

returns to Willowbrook because his family life is so bad."

Dr. Berman, who, at 64, has some firm convictions that are hard to shatter, insists that additional progress, the kind made under his guidance at Willowbrook State School, can only be made "by doctors doing research on the ward and not in centers with a microscope."



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**WHEN DR. BERMAN** was sent to Staten Island in 1949 from St. Lawrence State Hospital in Ogdensburg, he walked into "a bedlam; a war between the state and federal authorities; state and federal employes, and state and federal interests."

From that bedlam, and after settling the transfer of the property (Holloran VA Hospital during the war years), Dr. Berman and his small staff began a massive training and recruiting program.

After initial problems were ironed out, he recalls, funds were made available and the facilities for Willowbrook grew from a few buildings to its present complex of 51 structures of various sizes.

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**FROM HIS** second floor office in Building No. 1 Harold H. Berman, with eyes closed, can tell you the exact location of each building, what is going on inside and any other information you might want.

He knows everything about the self-sustaining facility. Most of the 2,000 workers who share an annual \$8 million payroll know Dr. Berman. But he is not satisfied.

Dr. Berman carried on his battle with Albany to change the name of the institution until he announced his retirement. "School is a misnomer," he says. "To conceal a mentally retarded child centuries ago a parent would say he was at 'school.' But Willowbrook is a hospital."

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**DR. BERMAN** insists that only under a medical man's guidance can progress be made in this field. "We had to educate medical men in the beginning, and now we are educating the public. But still, parents feel that mental retardation is a curse from God as retribution for past illness or is the fault of a mate."

From this outlook, he says, guilt feelings, depression and other emotional problems develop. "A doctor would classify a patient as a 'dopi' if a child was slow. Dopi means discharged to other public institution."

But while 3 per cent of births

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