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War on Disease at Willowbrook

By JULIE SUMMERS

Cooperation in many things is important; in research it is vital.

The New York University-Bellevue Medical Center and the Willowbrook State School found this out when Dr. Robert Ward and Dr. Saul Krugman of NYU approached Dr. Harold Berman, then the director of Willowbrook State School, on the subject of cooperative research and received his approval to proceed.

One project of this sort was on measles.

"Measles vaccine was tested here in 1960, "and the efficacy of the vaccine was proven in part here in one of the first clinical tests made," said Dr. Joan Giles, research associate professor of pediatrics at NYU-Bellevue Medical Center and head of current research being conducted at Willowbrook.

Cooperative research today also is being done by these two institutions on infectious hepatitis and German measles.

"We have progressed further in our German measles research than we have with hepatitis but not as far as with measles," said Dr. Giles.

"We have studied the effect of gamma globulin in the prevention of German measles," she said, "and have found that it does not eliminate the presence of virus in the blood. It only masks diagnosis by submerging the rash."

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DR. GILES explained that "we are attempting to control the endemic situation of viral hepatitis with the use of gamma globulin. Through our experience we have prevented much of the illness."

Gamma globulin was used against hepatitis in World War II. Studies indicated it did not prevent the disease altogether but was effective in modifying it.

Willowbrook has enlarged the earlier experience by contributing knowledge of dosage and duration of protection. This information has been available and helpful to the Peace Corps, the Army Epidemiological Board, and to other institutions faced with the control of endemic hepatitis.

Patients at Willowbrook State School, with the permission of their parents, take part in this research, according to Dr. Jack Hammond, senior director of the institution.

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DR. GILES said that groups of children with infectious hepatitis have been cared for in a special unit.

"Through detailed analysis of laboratory studies we have been able to contribute to the knowledge of periods of infectivity and the natural history of the disease," she said.

Nine workers are currently engaged in hepatitis research at the school—seven attendants in the ward, one research assistant and Dr. Giles.

"We are the clinical group," said the doctor, "and all the complicated laboratory work is done at the New York University Medical Center."

The focal point of the research unit at this time is the isolation of an organism, with production of a vaccine the ultimate goal.

"We work with the labs continually to determine the agent that causes the disease," said Dr. Giles. "From published and unpublished reports from all areas there are 18 candidate viruses under consideration as the cause of infectious hepatitis but to date there has been no confirmation of these reports."

THE NYU laboratories, in conjunction with the Willowbrook unit, have isolated such a candidate virus from patients with the disease. Work is directed toward positive identification and confirmation.

Before a virus can be proved to be the cause of a disease, it must be laboratory tested many times and the work must be duplicated in other laboratories across the country or around the world.

"There is a long lag between the isolation of a virus and the selling of a commercial vaccine," Dr. Giles emphasized. "There must be testing, retesting and reduplication.

"This is evidenced by the fact that the first clinical tests of the measles vaccine were started in 1958 and the vaccine was not licensed until March 1963."

Dr. Giles and Dr. Hammond pointed to the need for cooperation in research. They agreed that different agencies must cooperate to set up such a program.

"No one agency is equipped to do it alone these days because several specialists are needed," said Dr. Giles.

Dr. Giles said that without the cooperation of Willowbrook, without its clinical facilities and workers, the hepatitis, measles and German measles research might never have been accomplished.

The research conducted at the Willowbrook State School has been supported by the city's Health Research Council, the Commission on Viral Infections of the Armed Forces Epidemiological Board, and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

BIRTHDAY REWARDS — Several children who have just completed participation in the hepatitis research program at Willowbrook State School enjoy a birthday party. Staff attendant Mrs. William Kirk, left, looks on as Mrs. Joseph Callahan, kitchen attendant, lights the cake held by Dr. Joan Giles, head of the research unit.