

# Doubt Shrouds Probe Of Patient's Death

By MARK WIESNER

The circumstances surrounding the death of a 26-year-old patient in Building 9, Ward C, at Willowbrook State School are still under investigation by police today.

The patient, Thomas Cochrane, whose family lives in the Bronx, died of a single blow to the neck which shattered his larynx, police believed initially.

But further findings by the medical examiner has made it doubtful whether a blow could have broken the cartilage around the larynx.

The medical report led police to begin another round of questioning of patients in Ward C, including a 17-year-old youth who police said yesterday was a suspect.

District Attorney John M. Braisted Jr. had only this to say after conferring with detectives on the case and Assistant D. A. James J. Hasson Jr.:

"It was my opinion that further investigation would be required before an arrest is made."

**THE DIFFICULTY** police have met in establishing their case was brought home in a visit to 9C yesterday.

"Patients there are among the most retarded, most disturbed, strongest and as dangerous as any patients in any institution."

The assessment is not from police, but from a professional, Dr. Jack Hammond, the psychiatrist who is Willow-

brook's director. It is not meant in any other sense except as a description of the reality of life in Ward 9C.

Neither is the phrase "low grade imbeciles," used by Hasson to describe the residents, anything more than clinically descriptive.

Patients in 9C are at the bottom of the retarded ladder.

There are four buildings for men and two for women that house patients of the same intelligence level as those on 9C, Dr. Hammond explained yesterday.

Some of these patients are aggressive, some not. Two of the four wards in Building 9, including C Ward, are filled with aggressive types.

Hammond showed the way to Ward C on the second floor.

"There are 76 patients here now," Hammond said. "The capacity is 38."

The door that opens to Ward C is a door opening on chaos.

Milling, gesticulating men, many of them with facial or bodily disfigurements, roamed the floor of the dayroom, where the killing occurred.

Others watched a Popeye cartoon on television, vacantly following the action.

**THE PATIENTS** are active, sometimes assaultive, and are kept on heavy doses of tranquilizers. Some slept leaning on each other or on the floor, or under the wooden benches.

"They're relatively quiet now," Dr. Hammond said, "and it's summertime and the windows are open."

Dr. Hammond showed the

bench in the dayroom where the slaying occurred and showed the young man whom police considered a suspect. He was kept in seclusion in a separate room.

Cochrane died while one male attendant showered three patients and a woman attendant waited at the door to the adjoining shower room to dry them.

Hammond said that difficulty in getting male personnel makes it necessary to have women work in the men's wards. "Sometimes, we even have two women on a shift."

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**DR. HAMMOND** said the facility must operate with the staff positions the state allows. The recent addition of 200 titles has not helped, he said, because the jobs are not filled. Even if filled, they would not mean much when spread around the institution's 107 buildings.

He said this as he watched men of Ward C in the dining hall.

"All their food must be ground so they won't choke," it was explained. Nevertheless, some came perilously close to choking.

**Mrs. Arthur Cochrane**, mother of the slain patient, yesterday was disturbed by the fact that she had not been told how her son died.

But she acknowledged the difficulty of caring for patients like her son.

"Thomas had numerous bruises and things, but we realize children fight amongst themselves — especially the boys out there."