



The 'Snake Pit'

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Take a subject that has been hushed for years, like mental retardation and the secret child, expose it to candor and the reality of the day and it's a pity how irresponsibility comes back and takes over, and hysterical journalism.

Robert Kennedy did a laudable job last week, in emotional and dramatic testimony before a state committee. He spotlighted snake-pit conditions at an over-crowded, isolated mammoth institution for mental retardates on Staten Island. Immediately one of the newspapers began "exposing" the same conditions at a branch hospital right here in downtown Manhattan.

Willowbrook, on Staten Island, is, as a U. S. official once put it, "a huge institution, way out in beautiful green pastures, that's just a dumping ground for human beings." Gouverneur Hospital, the object of the new newspaper attack, is an old building full of new facilities and modern techniques. It's suffering for all the panic.

The parents of its children are suffering, too. They've read stories which make it sound like a vest-pocket Willowbrook. If all institutions for retarded children were as cheerful and functional, the problem, I insist, wouldn't be so starkly before us.

Gouverneur Hospital, except for its 72-year-old plant, is precisely what the new State Hygiene Dept. report calls for in its effort to revamp our care for retarded children. It's small, only 208 beds as opposed to the 6,000 at Willowbrook; it's in the heart of the city, so parents can visit and protect its ties to the community and so its staff can be close at hand and easily recruited.

Sprinklers have been installed, modern kitchens, cribs instead of big hospital beds. The "dirty mattresses" with kids crawling over them, as described by the "crusading" reporters, are therapeutic mats, at a cost to the taxpayer of \$75 each, and the kids are supposed to crawl over them.

It is not a snake pit and Gov. Rockefeller, who bowed to headline pressure yesterday by announcing it was purely a crisis stopgap and would be abandoned as soon as possible, would do well to read the report of his own Dept. of Hygiene.

The fact is, without the Governor's help, his experts have quietly lined up other old buildings around the state—a former TB hospital near Buffalo, a former VA center in the Adirondacks. They're even considering an old YMCA building near the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn.

The number of children born retarded is increasing. There will be 700,000 a year, three in every hundred, by 1970. Gouverneur is the new approach: don't bury them alive.

The enlightenment is spreading. More and more parents, heeding the State Assn. on Mental Retardation, are keeping their children in the community as long as possible. The rate of commitment, if not the number, is actually decreasing. But to those who commit, Willowbrook, as Robert Kennedy said, is a festering sore, but Gouverneur shouldn't be sacrificed to second thoughts.

I went through Gouverneur yesterday and I concede, from the outside, it looks like a dungeon. Its old red bricks are dark and sooty from the factories and the ship smoke around it, its familiar black-iron balconies are rusty half-circles above the El of the East River Drive.

I also concede an intensely personal interest: a seven-year-old nephew of mine is a patient there. His brain was damaged at birth; he lies flat on his back. But he was well fed and cleanly-kept, as were the other children around him. They all were watching television—the exaggerated cartoon motion held their short span of attention, as did the sound, and then the welcome distraction of the commercials. As much as they could be made comfortable, they were comfortable.

This old building with its 208 child-patients has a staff, virtually one for one, of 197. It costs \$4,900 a year for each child; the average for the rest of the state is \$1,900. I don't mean this as a paean to a tiny local institution; I mean it as a defense when the others, the huge monoliths around the state, are the real sore points.

The big state report came out yesterday. It calls for breaking up the 6,000-bed snake pits and building hospitals with 1,000 beds or less in each of the boroughs. The author of the report, a respected lawyer and mental hygienist named Hyman M. Forestenzer, agrees that Gouverneur, despite its ancient building, is exactly what he had in mind.

It's only a coincidence that the seven volumes of his report and Sen. Kennedy's long testimony appeared on the same weekend. The report was ready 11 days ago but the Governor's secretary was in Europe and it had to wait for official approval.

All turned out for the best. If the report had come out before the Kennedy disclosures, it might never have been noticed. Kennedy focussed on what's wrong; the report, three days later, focussed on what can be done.

What can't be done is muckraking where there's no muck—in an area where candor and reality are just beginning to make themselves felt.