

2 State Mental Hospitals Today: Problems Here and Gains Upstate



A disturbed youngster hides under blanket in one of the wards of Willowbrook State School for Mental Defectives.



Mrs. Stanley Verhey helps group of deaf children to learn lip-reading and talking. The school is understaffed.



Handicapped children learning to stand and walk. Governor Rockefeller has authorized 84 additional therapists.

Willowbrook Seeks to End Crowding and Add to Staff

By HOMER BIGAKT

In shocked silence a Staten Island grand jury toured Willowbrook State School for Mental Defectives yesterday and learned that, despite recent action by Governor Rockefeller, the institution will remain understaffed and overcrowded for months to come.

The jurors, accompanied by District Attorney John M. Braisted Jr., inspected the shower stalls where two patients were fatally burned by scalding water. Those and three other violent deaths in the last 14 months could have been avoided if the institution had been adequately staffed, according to Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook.

On Tuesday Governor Rockefeller authorized the recruitment of 84 additional therapists for the hospital. Therapists are the professionals who teach the mental defectives how to coordinate their movements, how to play, how to make things, and—for children with severe physical disabilities—how to walk and talk.

Kennedy Criticism

Without enough therapists to help them, many children at Willowbrook are consigned to what Senator Robert F. Kennedy, a recent visitor there, described as a life of blankness endured "in dimness and gloom and idleness and stench."

The jurors were visibly moved, some brushing away tears, when Dr. Hammond showed them a few of the "miracles" that can happen to retarded children when they receive therapy.

In one room the jurors saw children afflicted with cerebral palsy being trained how to stand, how to lift their feet and take a few halting steps.

In an adjacent room, Cindy, an 8-year-old spastic patient, whose hands always seemed to writhe uncontrollably, was being taught how to keep them motionless on her lap.

Willowbrook has only eight

physical rehabilitation therapists now. The Governor has authorized 12 new ones. And there are only 11 occupational therapists, 7 recreational therapists and 33 teachers. The Governor has approved 36 new occupational therapists, 23 more recreational therapists, 13 new teachers.

But Willowbrook always has had trouble with recruitment, and these specialists are in short supply. Dr. Hammond said it might take several months to find the additional skilled personnel.

Wards Also Understaffed

And there remains the drastic understaffing of the wards. Earlier this year Governor Rockefeller approved an increase in the number of ward attendants. But there are now 200 vacancies in ward personnel. Qualified workers are repelled by the overcrowding and by the stench of wards where many of the patients are not even toilet-trained.

Five violent deaths at Willowbrook have been attributed directly to inadequate custodial staff. The jurors seemed especially interested in the two scaldings.

They went first to Building 27 where, on May 13, John Taylor, 8 years old, suffered an excruciatingly painful accident while in the custody of an attendant.

John had been in the isolation room, suffering from an intestinal parasite. Late that afternoon an 18-year-old girl, who had been hired a short time before as a ward attendant, took him to the shower room.

There had been some trouble with the plumbing. The cold water valves were stuck and the cold water pipes were clogged. The mixing valves didn't work, and the water coming out of the taps was steaming hot.

The girl, for some reason, ap-

parently did not notice the steam rising from the spray hose she was directing on her patient. Nor did she seem to detect the violent redness that developed on John's back even though the patient was screaming. But the disturbed at Willowbrook often cry.

John was dressed and returned to the isolation room. The girl reported nothing. In his agony, the boy began butting his head against the wall. He hurt himself so badly that a nurse summoned a doctor to stitch a headwound. Then the doctor, preparing to administer a dose of penicillin, stripped the boy and discovered, to his horror, that John's body was blackened with burns. The child died early the next morning.

In the hall outside the shower there is this notice on the bulletin board dated May 15:

"Test water BEFORE showering each patient."

"What happened to the girl?"

"We terminated her employment," Dr. Hammond said. She was never arrested. At first, according to District Attorney Braisted, "she tried to hide it, then, on the advice of her attorney, she gave a full statement."

The jurors, assured that the valves were now in proper working order, went to the Medical-Surgical Building, where a fatal scalding had occurred in February. On that occasion, Herbert Harber, 42, a paralytic, was pushed in his wheelchair under a steaming shower by a "disturbed" patient.

To reach the shower the jur-

ors passed a ward where they saw, among several bedridden patients, a youth wearing a football helmet as he lay in a bed with padded sides.

A nurse explained that ordinary football helmets were often used to keep the very disturbed patients from butting their heads.

Blind Learn 'Memory Work'

After lunch the jurors returned to Willowbrook and saw some more hopeful aspects of the place. Dr. Hammond took them to a classroom where 14 blind children were learning "memory work." The children had memorized a Halloween poem, which they recited in unison, then they sang "Alleghany Moon." Their teacher played a recording of "Carolina," which the children accompanied by ringing bells and playing xylophones and a glockenspiel.

A boy who had misplaced his baton groped vainly about, but did not show his panic. "A few years ago," his teacher said, "Arthur would have been so upset over this that he'd probably go into tantrums. Now he waits patiently."

The jurors also saw classes in speech training and occupational therapy. But Dr. Hammond emphasized that many children remained without mental and physical stimulation and that they would deteriorate and become even more retarded unless they had more contact with the staff.

The Governor's steps, he said, represented "only the minimal requirements." The next step must be some reduction in overcrowding, he declared, and perhaps the state would lease or purchase prefabricated stainer year. Copies of the booklet are available free from the center, Box 4068, Santa Barbara, Calif., the center announced.

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