

What Is The Truth?

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There is no question that there are critical problems in New York City's municipal hospitals.

There are problems arising out of the affiliation of city and voluntary hospitals. There are questions about medical ethical practices, of fraud, of inefficiency, of shortages, of unsanitary equipment.

State Sen. Seymour Thaler has unquestionably done a public service by dramatically calling attention to these wide ranging problems.

But the time has come to take the running debate out of the headlines, off the TV screens and into the responsible atmosphere of the public hearing room.

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We have had weeks of charges and counter-charges, many of them very vague and beyond the understanding of the public.

In at least one case, a considerable portion of the public replied with an emphatic "Not so."

After an early attack by Sen. Thaler on conditions at Sea View Hospital, this newspaper received many letters from the hospital staff, from relatives of patients and from patients themselves denying the allegations made by Mr. Thaler.

Last week, the legislator claimed that retarded children at Willowbrook State School had been used in a study of hepatitis and alleged that at least some of the tests were not authorized by parents.

Again there was a denial. Dr. Jack Hammond, Willowbrook's director, said the records are available but that "no investigator from the state . . . asked to see them."

Dr. Alan D Miller, state commissioner of mental hygiene, also made a heated denial.

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Where is the truth? Indeed, is there a single, simple unqualified truth in any such question?

There were charges that surgeons performed an operation on a young woman in a city hospital without her permission and that deformed limbs were removed from youngsters — all just to demonstrate techniques to student doctors.

These too were categorically and angrily denied, whereupon Sen. Thaler replied that he would document his charges "within a few days."

We're all for documentation but we urge the senator to save it for the state's full investigation. All this is too serious to be bandied about in headlines and 30-second TV statements. We are dealing here with the health of the city and the confidence of the people in medical institutions and the medical profession.

Sen. Thaler has raised a host of questions that have gone too long unanswered. But these questions are too important — and too complicated — to be answered with unsubstantiated conclusions based upon isolated facts.

All parties involved would now serve the public best by declaring a moratorium on headline hunting and devote all their energies to cooperating in a sober, judicial investigation.