

Medical News

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Exclusive: **The Willowbrook Hepatitis Project**

Studies With Children Backed On Medical, Ethical Grounds

Medical News—Staff Report

NEW YORK—In the current headline-making rounds of accusations and rebuttals about patients in public hospitals here being used as “guinea pigs” for medical research, no one has had a harder time explaining their position than the investigators at Willowbrook State School.

The accusation they face, made by a legislator in a speech on the floor of the State Senate, is that 500 or more mentally retarded children at Willowbrook were injected with live hepatitis virus in a research program.

The only part of the accusation they can refute outright is the number of children in the study—“it’s a little more than 250, not 500,” one of the investigators said.

Charge Uncontested

Otherwise the legislator’s original charge is essentially correct—as far as it goes. A principal spokesman for the Willowbrook investigations told MEDICAL NEWS, “It’s hard to defend yourself against a half-truth. You can tell the other half of the truth but that doesn’t do it.”

In his initial speech on the subject, State Sen. Seymour R. Thaler, Democrat from the Queens section of New York City, said nothing about whether consent had been obtained from parents of children in the Willowbrook study.

When the Willowbrook investigators avowed that parental consent had been obtained, Senator Thaler replied that parents had no right to sign their children into a medical research project. In addition, he said, physicians have no right to give a disease to a child in order to study the disease.

Putting his views into legal form, Senator Thaler a few days later introduced a bill that would preclude the use of children in medical research except in an unspecified emergency situation. The measure also would demand “informed consent” in writing from any adult entering a research program.