

## Doctors

# Must Experiment On Humans

## But What Are The Patient's Rights?

By WALTER GOODMAN

W HEN, last winter, in the course of his persistent campaign against conditions and practices at New York's hospitals, State Senator Seymour R. Thaler charged that thousands of indigent patients were being used as guinea pigs, he struck at a peculiarly sensitive public nerve. Who in the past 20 years has been able to hear of medical experiments on humans without cringing again at the memory of the German doctors and their work on members of "lesser" races? Thaler did nothing in his emotional speech on the floor of the State Senate to spare us fresh horror. He told of 500 mentally retarded children between the ages of 3 and 9 being injected with a live hepatitis virus as part of a research program at Willowbrook State School on Staten Island; he charged that at Harlem Hospital children sometimes have their congenitally deformed limbs removed as a demonstration of surgical procedures to internes and residents, and that a 23-year-old woman was made to undergo a hysterectomy as part of a similar educational process; at Bellevue Hospital, said the Senator, five out of 1,000 alcoholics died after

doctors took liver biopsies for a research program.

Thaler's allegations were promptly disputed by hospital officials. The chief resident in surgery at Harlem Hospital indignantly denied both the hysterectomy charge and the assertion that deformed limbs had been amputated for demonstration purposes. A spokesman at Bellevue said that his records showed no case of a patient dying from a needle biopsy and that the biopsies were taken because liver damage is always suspected of alcoholics. (He did not pursue the question of using derelicts for experimental purposes.) As to the hepatitis tests, the State Commissioner of Mental Hygiene defended that program as having resulted in an 80- to 85-per-cent reduction in the incidence of the disease at Willowbrook.

So the particulars of the cases remain in controversy—and will no doubt continue to remain there, since doctors are famously loath to share medical records with outsiders. And even if the records were opened, we would have to be prepared for differences of interpretation among the experts. Whatever Thaler's failures as a reporter, however, the issue that he brought onto Page One is real. Medical experiments on human beings are being conducted in hospitals

WALTER GOODMAN is an editor and writer who regularly contributes to magazines.