

Willowbrook State School acquires some extra know-how

By MAXINE SITTS

Recently, Willowbrook State School gained 31 years in pediatrics experience.

In a single day two years ago, the 5,600-resident facility gained 46 years of medical experience—25 of them in general practice, another 21 in obstetrics.

The key to this input in knowledge lies not in a new learning machine—but in additions to the staff in the form of qualified, experienced physicians who have a good number of years of private and hospital practice behind them.

Physicians like Dr. Curtis Becker, who practiced on Staten Island 46 years, both in general medicine and obstetrics.

"I got too old to keep up a private practice, but after two months of retirement I decided it was not for me," he said.

Two years ago, he discovered that Willowbrook, the largest institution for mentally retarded persons in the country, could use qualified physicians.

His "retirement" turned into providing medical care for patients in Building 2.

"I was dumbfounded by what I found," he recalled. "I had worked in hospitals all my life, and had never found the dedication of staff that I found here."

Becker is a past vice president of the Richmond County Medical Society and a former chief of obstetrics at Staten Island Hospital. He now lives in New Jersey.

All in all, five Island physicians have joined up with Willowbrook after "retiring" from their own practices—physicians with a total of 157 years in the medical profession.

Besides Becker, they are Dr. Max Werner of West Brighton, formerly in pediatric practice; Dr. Howard Dangerfield of Stapleton, formerly in obstetrics and gynecology; Dr. William Frew of Westerleigh, formerly in general practice and surgery; and Dr. George McCormick of Dongan Hills, formerly in pediatric practice.

"This is no sit-down job," remarked Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook. "But now the doctor has regular hours, with only occasional night duty. He can spend more time with his family."

The veteran of the group, Dr. Werner, who has been affiliated with Willowbrook for 13 years, spoke for the others when he explained his decision to join the institution's staff.

"We all began practicing when a doctor was self-sufficient," he said. "But the 'solo practice' days are over.

No one man can handle the demands of today, with a third party (the government) telling him what he can and can't do."

For some physicians, group practice is the answer. And in some respects, Willowbrook is similar to a group practice, with a staff of 27 full-time physicians to share the duties. Dr. McCormick, who joined the school only four weeks ago, was a well-known Island pedi-

atrician for 31 years, director of pediatrics at St. Vincent's Medical Center and president of the Richmond County Medical Society.

"You see diseases here that you've only read about before. If you're curious, you can learn a lot. And there's no hectic pace of private practice," he said.

"There's a lot of serious work going on here," noted Dr. Werner, who gave up a 32-year pediatric practice in 1965 to join Willowbrook full-time.

Rejecting the notion that only "custodial care" is rendered at the school, he listed occupational and physical therapy, research and other programs carried out there by personnel from all over the city—including New York University Medical School and Downstate Medical Center.

"You get complete cooperation on any treatment you want done," added Dr. Dangerfield, for 27 years a leading Island gynecologist and associate physician at Staten Island Hospital.

"I drove by Willowbrook every day on house calls," said

Dr. Frew, who was in private general practice 21 years before joining the school earlier this year. "But I never knew all that was going on inside. Working here is a real education."