

Project on Hepatitis Research Is Now Praised by State Critic

By WALTER SULLIVAN

A state Senator who has been one of the most outspoken critics of using retarded children in hepatitis research said yesterday he was now persuaded that the work was being properly conducted.

His comment followed an announcement by Dr. Saul Krugman at New York University Medical School that the program had apparently resulted in immunization of some children against the most insidious form of the disease — serum hepatitis.

The critic was State Senator Seymour B. Thaler, who said in 1967 that children being infected with the disease at Willowbrook State School on Staten Island were being used as "human guinea pigs."

Reached yesterday in Albany, Senator Thaler said that Dr. Krugman "has done a magnificent thing," and described him as a "dedicated" and "decent" researcher.

His earlier objection, Senator Thaler said, was based on reports that "over-zealous employees" at Willowbrook were using coercive tactics in persuading parents to allow their children to take part in the project. The parents were allegedly told that, while the school was otherwise full, their children could be admitted if they took part in the hepatitis project.

Whatever the validity of that accusation, Senator Thaler said he no longer objected to the project, whose success has depended heavily on the circumstances at Willowbrook — conditions which, according to a number of researchers, are typical of such institutions.

Because of the difficulty of maintaining a high level of personal hygiene in such a school, hepatitis and bacterial dysentery are often contracted

by children soon after their arrival.

The strains of hepatitis at Willowbrook are mild, according to Dr. Krugman and his colleagues, and, in any case, hepatitis is rarely a serious disease in children. At Willowbrook it may run its course without producing outward symptoms.

Therefore, it was argued, since the new arrival at Willowbrook is almost sure to contract hepatitis, it was advantageous for the child to contract the disease under the carefully supervised conditions of the experiment. This spares the boy or girl from the danger of suffering simultaneously from dysentery and hepatitis — a frequent occurrence with other new inmates.

At the medical center, it was evident that memories of the bitter controversy of a few years ago were still vivid. Dr. Krugman explained in some detail the manner in which parental consent was obtained.

The procedure, he said, was approved by local, Federal and state agencies, as well as by a research committee in Washington. Originally, a written prospectus was submitted to the parents and they were asked to sign a release if they agreed to allow their child to participate.

It was apparently at this stage that controversy arose; for Dr. Krugman said a "better way" was then found. He explained that it was concluded that dependence on the prospectus only did not result in "truly informed consent."

In the new procedure, four briefing sessions are conducted each year for parents interested in the project. This, Dr. Krugman said, allows more articulate parents to raise questions that other parents might be unwilling or unable to put into words.