

Hammond: 'I don't have to tell you anything'

Willowbrook head fires 2 who spoke out

By JANE KURTIN

A doctor and a social worker at Willowbrook State School — both of whom were instrumental in bringing the critical situation at the institution to public attention — were dismissed Wednesday afternoon.

Shortly after 1 p.m., Dr. Michael Wilkins and Mrs. Elizabeth Lee received typed memorandums from Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook, that their dismissals would be effective at the end

of that work day.

As provisional employees, Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee — each with more than a year at Willowbrook — have no right to appeal their terminations.

Although work evaluations prepared by their superiors have been consistently excellent, Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee received no official explanation from Dr. Hammond for their sudden dismissals.

Dr. Hammond refused to answer any questions pertaining to the firing of two employees

he has privately referred to as "troublemakers."

Asked to give some justification for the dismissal, Dr. Hammond replied: "No comment. I don't have to tell you anything."

During a second phone call to Dr. Hammond, at which time he was asked to reply to statements by Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee, Dr. Hammond reiterated: "I don't have to tell you anything."

The firing of Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee was met with dis-

belief and consternation by Max Schneier, chairman of the Federation of Parents Organizations for the New York State Mental Institutions.

"We deplore this action," Schneier said, "and feel that in 1972 the director of an institution can no longer sit in his chair as the sole arbiter of all differences and disputes."

"We will not permit any director," Schneier continued, "to take any such unilateral actions and we insist on the rights of consultation and will demand such rights."

Schneier, who has scheduled a meeting Monday with Dr. Alan Miller, director of the state Department of Mental Hygiene, said he will demand the reinstatement of Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee pending an investigation into the reasons for their dismissal.

"We will pursue this strongly," Schneier said, "and if we do not receive satisfaction from Dr. Miller, we will have an audience with Gov. Rockefeller and demand their reinstatement."

"The federation," Schneier concluded, "will not countenance retaliatory action by a director or a staff member."

Assemblyman Andrew Stein, chairman of a special Democratic Task Force on Health which toured Willowbrook several weeks ago, also issued a statement condemning Dr. Hammond's action against Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee.

"Willowbrook's condition is critical enough without further attrition," Stein said.

"If these employes displayed professional incompetence, Dr. Hammond's right to dismiss them would be unchallenged."

But, Stein continued, "If as some people allege, these employes were dismissed solely because they alerted the press to the condition at Willowbrook, then their dismissal was in the worst interests of the patients and the institution itself."

"I have begun an investigation concerning Dr. Hammond's action. The sole criterion which should be utilized in hiring and firing decisions is the professional competence of the employe. No employe should feel his job tenure might be jeopardized because of his willingness to describe the conditions at Willowbrook to the parents of patients or to the press."

Schneier shared Stein's concern that the firing of Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee would further frighten employes at Willowbrook who have complaints about the institution and the conditions for patients and workers.

"If a director can unilaterally fire a doctor and a social worker," Schneier said, "then we feel this will intimidate the parents and the patients from making known any of their justifiable complaints."

Dr. Wilkins, who interned, did part of his residency and a year of service at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, Clifton, was mentioned recently in an article about Bernard Carabello, a patient at Willowbrook State School.

Carabello, who suffers from

cerebral palsy, was interrogated by two assistant directors of the institution about his relationship with Dr. Wilkins and, according to an affidavit signed by Carabello, about the doctor's personal life.

When Carabello refused to answer questions about Dr. Wilkins' private life, the affidavit read, he was threatened and warned he would be "locked up where no one would see him and he would see no one."

Dr. Wilkins, who has been active in organizing parents of Willowbrook patients to seek re-

form in the institution, has expressed the frustration which he has faced in treating patients at the state institution.

"Bodies of patients are covered with scratches, bruises and scars. There is a 100 per cent incidence of hepatitis throughout the institution and rampant parasites," Dr. Wilkins said.

"Worst of all is the emptiness of a life spent sitting on the floor with no clothes in a big room, going weeks and days without being spoken to. These are the preventable conditions at Willowbrook that we have sought to change.

"But one can't stop the scars and bruises inflicted by patients who are crowded next to each other and forced to fight each other for attention, clothing and scraps of paper on the floor to play with.

"One cannot stop hepatitis or parasites which are spread by feces, unless one can stop having 70 children share the same toilet. One cannot treat retarded people as humans unless more training staff and pleasant surroundings are available."

Mrs. Lee, whose interest in Willowbrook is intensified by the fact that she has a 16-year-

old brother who is retarded, was praised unabashedly by her immediate supervisor, Miss Dianne Fredericks.

"Mrs. Lee is an excellent worker," Miss Fredericks said. "She is a concerned case worker who has tried to plan for her families and children as effectively as possible. She was one of the best people we've ever had.

"I'd say," Miss Fredericks continued, "that Elizabeth was one of the best things that's happened to Willowbrook. She was able to effect change when necessary.

"We are very sorry that she was fired. I hope that the administration will be forced to reinstate her, and if they do, we'll welcome her with open arms."

Parents and relatives of patients in Building 6, where Dr. Wilkins was assigned, have reportedly begun circulating petitions demanding his reinstatement.

One group of angered parents has allegedly threatened that if Dr. Wilkins is not reinstated, they will blockade Building 6, denying entrance or exit to anyone, until he is back on the job.