

# Grim tale of Willowbrook death: Child choking, nurse on phone

By JANE KURTIN

"I heard one of the other attendants scream that Sharon Smalls was choking, and I ran to the crib to help. So did some of the other attendants on the ward.

"We wheeled Sharon in her crib to the treatment room and told the nurse on duty that she was choking and should be suctioned (have food removed from the throat with a suction device)."

"The nurse — Miss Bartons — just went ahead and gave Sharon an injection and told us to take her across the hall and administer oxygen. Then the phone rang, and the nurse went back and answered the phone.

"She talked on the phone for about five to ten minutes. No one knew how to administer the oxygen and by the time the nurse got across the hall, Sharon was dead."

The preceding was part of the testimony given yesterday during the hearing of the Society for the Prevention of

Cruelty to Children by Barbara Wright, an attendant at Willowbrook State School for about two years.

Miss Wright, who said she witnessed the events leading to the death of 6-year-old Sharon Smalls on Dec. 1, 1970, explained that she had not been permitted to volunteer information about the incident to a representative of the administration nor had she ever been questioned about the circumstances of the child's death.

Her testimony went like this:

"I was on duty in Building 14 — where babies are — in the A Ward, working the 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. shift. During the feeding time, I heard one of the attendants scream that Smalls was aspirating (choking).

"It took us about a minute to get Smalls wheeled from the ward to the treatment room. We had to push her in the crib. The treatment room is a little way down the hall.

"The nurse on duty in the treatment room was Margaret Bartons. There was no one else there at that time. I told Bartons that we usually suction a child when they are choking, but she gave her a hypodermic needle and told us to get her across the hall to the oxygen room and set up the oxygen tent.

"Then the phone rang and Bartons answered it. While she was on the phone, it looked to me that Smalls died. When the nurse got to the oxygen room, she sent me back to the ward.

"I know what it looks like

when a child is aspirating because I've seen it dozens of times. I'd seen Smalls aspirating before that time. Every time before, to my knowledge, the child was suctioned. I have never seen anyone administer a needle when the child is choking.

"She was gasping for air and kicking. She kept doing it after she got the shot. We couldn't say that Smalls was dead because the doctor has to come and pronounce a patient dead."

"I never was trained in how

to use oxygen, but I was trained in how to use the suction device. Now, I think, the attendants are trained how to use oxygen, but not when I was being trained.

"After this all happened — the next day when I was off duty — I went to see Dr. Milton Jacobs (assistant director at Willowbrook State School) and I was going to tell him about it all. When I started telling him, he flipped his hands up and told me that it wasn't his problem.

"A couple of days later, Dr. Jacobs came to talk to me about it; but when I tried to say what happened, he didn't want to listen.

"He asked me, 'What is aspirating?' and when I began to tell him it's when a person is choking, he told me to shut up and asked me where did I get my degree."

A member of the hearing panel asked Miss Wright at this point in the proceedings if anyone had witnessed Dr. Jacobs telling her to shut up and five employees of Willowbrook who were in the audience raised their hands and said that they were there at the time.

Ira Raab, attorney for the SPOC, and other panel members, repeatedly asked Miss Wright if after the death of Sharon Smalls she had been questioned about the incident.

"No one ever asked me anything about it," Miss Wright said.

"Then I tried to file a grievance about it with Nurse Bartons — it was an oral stage one grievance — and she had

a supervising nurse with her as her representative (union representative)," she continued.

"They kept telling me that Smalls' dying was not the grievance and that the grievance was shift change."

Councilman Robert I. Postel asked Miss Wright what a change of shift had to do with the subject of Sharon Smalls' death.

"They thought that I was going to file a grievance because they were going to change my shift from the day shift to the night shift," Miss Wright said.

"Had you been approached about the change in your working hours before you reported Sharon Smalls' death?" Postel asked.

"No," Miss Wright replied.

"They didn't say anything about changing shifts until after all this happened."

Raab said that the case would be referred to the district attorney for a possible grand jury investigation.

Rabbi Phillip Goldberg, Jewish chaplain at Willowbrook, testified briefly at yesterday's Borough Hall hearing, and said that he had witnessed no cases of cruelty to children.

"The only thing I have seen," Rabbi Goldberg said, "was parent cruelty. I consider it cruelty to parents when some doctors — who I would rather not name — tell parents that their children are educable when they are not."