

MEDICINE

Human Warehouse

By name and locale, Willowbrook State School seems a pleasant enough place: a teaching institution on a 400-acre bucolic tract on Staten Island in New York Harbor. Actually, Willowbrook, the world's largest institution for the mentally retarded, is a school in name only. It is instead a grim repository for those whom society has abandoned. What sets Willowbrook apart from similar facilities in other states is sudden exposure. Parents, legislators and newsmen have recently made headlines by attacking the system that allows such a place to exist. In the process, they have won some small sops for Willowbrook's pathetic prisoners. More important, they have shown how hopeless and archaic is the custodial approach to the problem of mental retardation.

The battle of Willowbrook began last December when two staff members, Dr. Michael Wilkins, 30, and Mrs. Elizabeth Lee, 29, a social worker, began urging parents of Willowbrook children to campaign for better conditions. The two, who were later fired, triggered an emotional avalanche. A local daily, the *Staten Island Advance*, took up the cause with a damaging series of articles on the institution. New York television stations dispatched camera crews and gave generous amounts of air time. Politicians also visited the institution. All reached the same conclusion: conditions at Willowbrook were intolerable.

Odor of Despair. Built in 1941 to house 3,000, Willowbrook now has a population of 5,200. Half the "patients" are under 21, and at least three-quarters are classified as "profoundly" retarded (IQ under 20) or "severely" retarded (under 36). For a handful of its residents, the school lives up to its name: it has a clean, new and well-staffed education section where "moderately" (IQ from 36 to 52) and "mildly" (from 53 to 68) retarded children

live in small brightly decorated dormitories. These youngsters, considered trainable, attend classes that teach reading and self-care.

But for most of Willowbrook's residents, the institution is a warehouse, a place capable of providing only shelter and the barest essentials, for those whose families are either unwilling or unable to care for them. One building designed to accommodate 188 currently houses 250 severely retarded and seriously disturbed adolescent girls in conditions so crowded that one bed must often be moved in order to reach another. Training of any kind is nonexistent, though recent experience elsewhere has shown that seemingly hopeless cases can benefit from professional attention. The girls spend their days sitting, standing or lying in a large, marble-floored room that resembles Sar-

tre's vision of hell. Bare and high-ceilinged, its walls covered with flaking green paint, the room is redolent of sweat, urine, excrement—and despair. Many of the patients are incontinent; the few attendants are kept busy changing them or putting clothes back on those who keep tearing them off. There is no time left to carry out rehabilitation programs. "It just kills me," says one attendant. "We're so busy that we can't do anything that really helps them."

Wards for profoundly retarded children are no better. By night, the children, many of whom have physical handicaps as well, sleep in closely spaced cribs. By day, they sit strapped into special chairs, recline in two-wheeled wagons that look like peddler's pushcarts or lie listlessly on mats on the floor. Some of the youngsters weep or grunt unintelligibly; most make no sound at all. A few children with severe physical handicaps but normal intellects share the accommoda-

WILLOWBROOK STATE SCHOOL WARD FOR SEVERELY RETARDED ADULT PATIENTS

