

# Where Suffering Is Routine

By EDMUND NEWTON

"In the 10 years my son has been in Willowbrook he's had both ankles broken, both eyelids slashed, cuts on his cheeks and all his front teeth knocked out," said Cecilia Samartin, a member of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children at Willowbrook.

Were the injuries the work of other patients, staff members or the 14-year-old youth himself? "No one seems to know," said Mrs. Samartin.

But the only way to end such injuries is to allow parents to participate in policy-making at the state school, the society maintains. "More of a parent presence will motivate the staff to do a better job," said society president Anthony Pinto.

## In the Headlines

Both the administration of the vast Staten Island institution and the state Dept. of Mental Hygiene agree. The school has been the subject of numerous exposes recently—revealing wards jammed with retardants, some maimed, all with little to do.

There are presently about 5000 patients in the state school, which the Mental Hygiene Dept. has determined should hold no more than 3000. Parents charge that frequently a single attendant oversees as many as 50 patients.

"New administrative structures—with parents involved in policy-making—are still evolving," said Willowbrook's acting director Miodrag Ristic. "When an in-house experiment doesn't work, you can scrap it. But with them [the Benevolent Society], the experiment becomes a sacred compact which you can't break."

Some 40 members of the society demonstrated at the school's administrative building yesterday, charging they have been consistently excluded from important decisions despite official "lip service" to the concept of parent participation.

They then "symbolically" occupied Dr. Ristic's office—staging a brief sit-in with the cooperation of the administrator—and phoned the Mental Hygiene Dept., demanding a meeting with Commissioner Alan D. Miller.

State and school officials have agreed "in principle" since last December to the need for parent participation, said Murray Schneps, vice president of the society. But he charged the state had—"without any consultation with the parents"—transferred children out of Willowbrook.

"Consultation seems to mean to them that they tell us after it's all over," Schneps complained.

Yesterday's demonstration was the beginning of "a campaign to demand our rights," Schneps said. Previous demonstrations, he added, were staged "in reaction to the administration."