

# Willowbrook director starts to dismantle it



Dr. Miodrag Ristic, acting director of Willowbrook State School is at work to dismantle the mammoth institution in favor of more intimate and localized services.

By GERALD S. NAGEL

Dr. Miodrag Ristic is four weeks into his tenure as acting director of the Willowbrook State School, but he has already begun to implement the state's decision to dismantle it.

Dr. Ristic, who is a charming and gracious 34-year-old psychiatrist from Yugoslavia, said he was appointed to the position not only because of his three years as deputy for clinical services, but

also because he agrees with the State Department of Mental Hygiene that large institutions for the mentally retarded should be decentralized with an eye towards returning the patient to family life.

During an hour-long interview in his office, at which the slim administrator wore a blue polo shirt and wash and wear trousers and his curly black hair dipped down to his forehead, Dr. Ristic discussed why this concept is now widely favored by mental health experts.

"The sheer size of an institution such as this is impersonal and dehumanizing," Dr. Ristic said, "and anyone who can choose between a high-rise apartment and a small home of his own, can glimpse that.

"Public places are nice to visit, but no one, including the retarded, want to live there," he added.

"We can return many patients to their families if they receive the proper training and there are better situations than

large institutions to serve those not ready for that," said Dr. Ristic, who speaks with an accent.

Willowbrook, he said, would become part of a comprehensive mental health plan to serve only Staten Island and be a residence for only its most profoundly retarded adults and children.

Dr. Ristic said his predecessor, Dr. Jack Hammond was unable to implement this idea, which Hammond also favored, because a state freeze on employment that led to 900 vacancies in two years, left him without the necessary staff.

Disclosures of neglect and abuse that were initiated by the Advance late last year and later followed up on by others in the city and national news media, he said, contributed to an increase in allocations which enabled the school to replace 800 employes so far.

Dr. Ristic said the long process of dismantlement would begin when the ratio of patients to professional and non-professionals in direct service to them has dropped to three to two.

Currently there are 2,450 employes for the 5,200 patients, and, with no admissions planned and vacancies to be filled, the ratio should be achieved by late 1974, he said.

Dr. Ristic is preparing for this by decentralization and has already assigned some of his authority to his deputy directors for clinical and administrative services and has begun to outline ways they could delegate authority.

"I don't know and I can't possibly know the personal needs of every patient," Dr. Ristic said, "But those who work with him daily such as his doctor or social worker might and they should have the authority to act."

"If a patient has \$10 and wants it to buy some clothes, I am now the only one who can authorize the money be released from the vault."

"The decentralization will free me and others for tours, coordination, consultation and handling of special situations. I don't want to be in this office more than two hours a week. I want to be out there — listening, talking, doing."

Dr. Ristic said he has not been surprised by anything so far in his tenure, although he is impressed with the difficulty of reconciling the legitimate but conflicting objectives of the administration staff, parents,

and state.

He said he would probably accept permanent appointment as director if it were offered to him.

Dr. Ristic received his medical training in his native Yugoslavia, served his residency in London and was medical director for 1,600 patients at Cambridge State School, in Cambridge, Mass., prior to his appointment to Willowbrook in 1969.

He lives on the school grounds with his wife, Yvonne, and their daughters, Katharine, 4, and Elizabeth, 2.