

Willowbrook: Same scene

"There has been no change in conditions at Willowbrook State School. The fact is that basic symptoms are still there." Assemblyman Andrew Stein.

"You don't see any disturbances. You don't see any people that are not clothed. You don't see anyone banging his head on the floors or walls." Dr. Miodrag Ristic, acting director of Willowbrook.

By JOAN MOTYKA

The wards were still overcrowded with the rocking, barely clothed residents, and the attendants, as they rushed through feeding and care, were still few in number.

The bathrooms still had broken toilets and feces on the floors and walls, and many of the residents still went barefoot through the mess.

But Dr. Miodrag Ristic, acting director, said: "I'm not too ashamed of the place."

The "place," of course is Willowbrook. The time was yesterday and the occasion was a return visit by Assemblyman Andrew Stein, Manhattan Democrat, one of the early Willowbrook critics. Stein was back to see just what the months of publicity, uproar and debate had accomplished.

He didn't like what he saw.

The tour through two "typical" buildings yesterday showed drawings or decorations on the once bare walls, and Lillian Buchanan, a mental hygiene therapy aide, claimed now there was "more hope."

Yet the residents still were sitting or lying in corners, and the bathrooms still have sticky floors.

"Willowbrook today is even more depressing than it was six months ago," Stein said. "When conditions continue to deteriorate after all the publicity, you begin to wonder whether you're just talking to yourself."

Stein yesterday called on Gov. Rockefeller to visit the school and to "offer a firm pledge that substantive improvements will be made." He also advocated increasing the staff size.

He noted that an investigation by his office had revealed that each day an average of nearly 10 residents suffered cuts requiring stitches.

He added that the investigation did not reveal one adult ward in which some of the toilets were not broken, and that in one ward a full section of five toilets was closed off by a metal bench, although supervisors reported having requested repairs as long as four months ago.

He stated that neither parents nor the Board of Visitors was normally notified if a resident suffered an injury that did not require hospitalization, and added that he received complaints that investigations into beatings seldom resulted in disciplinary action.

Stein toured the buildings yesterday with an entourage of cameramen and reporters, with hopes of bringing Willowbrook back into public focus.

In the bright lights that glared into the resident's faces, could be seen young men drawing in small groups or children sitting alone on the floors.

Dr. Ristic's side of the story refutes claims by Stein that no improvements have been made.

MADE UP MIND FIRST

"Assemblyman Stein made up his mind before coming here," Ristic said. "First and foremost, if one tries to find out what the improvements are, you don't go to a few wards that have a history of problems."

He noted that there are 200 fewer residents since January and 400 more employees. As of June, he added, there has been no one in seclusion, and since 1964 the death rate at Willowbrook has dropped 30 per cent.

"Maybe the improvements on the ward level are slight, but there have been improvements," Dr. Ristic said. "One tries within the limits of the physical plant to provide a human touch as much as one can."

He said Willowbrook has been hiring 50 new people for ward work every two weeks, but added it takes time to process and train the new employees.

Although the turnover in employes has been "great," he said there has been "a perceptible visible improvement."

"The limitation is not of money," he claimed. "It's a matter of getting qualified people and placing the residents out."