

Ristic Gets the Nod To Run Willowbrook

By ROGER WETHERINGTON

The highly sensitive post of director at the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, the nation's largest and perhaps most controversial institution for the retarded, went yesterday to a young Yugoslavian-born psychiatrist, Dr. Miodrag Ristic.

Ristic, deputy director since April and acting director since June, had actively sought the \$37,511-a-year post, which is a traditional hot spot, periodically drawing some of the loudest and bitterest criticism of any medical job in the city.

As director, he looks forward to fulfilling the state's commitment to reduce the population of the overcrowded school from 5,000 to 3,000 in two years, he said in an interview yesterday.

Expects Phaseout

Over the next decade or so, he expects Willowbrook to be phased out in its present form, as smaller, community-based programs spring up as alternatives to the giant institutions favored in earlier periods. State Mental Hygiene Commissioner Alan Miller in announcing Ristic's appointment, cited his "administrative ability" to handle the challenges of this "critical time" at Willowbrook.

Ristic, 34, said the institution is far better today than it was at the beginning of the year when a public and press furor erupted over staff shortages caused by the state's budget crunch. The staff is up to 3,400 from a low of 2,600, he said.

Plans for Transfers

Last January, admissions to Willowbrook were halted, and in July the state announced a two-year plan to transfer about 1,000 of Willowbrook's residents to smaller community facilities in the other boroughs. Another 1,000 are to be placed in foster homes or special hostels. That would end Willowbrook's perennial overcrowding.

A giant place such as Willowbrook "can never be ideal," Ristic conceded, citing its "bare, empty, large halls." So big an institution is "dehumanizing," he said.

For that reason he considers



Dr. Miodrag Ristic
Tackles tough new post

it a "likely possibility" that Willowbrook will exist in a decade or so as only a small facility serving Staten Island residents exclusively. The fate of most of the buildings on its grounds can be decided later, Ristic said.

Went to Rome School

Ristic succeeds Dr. Jack Hammond, who headed Willowbrook for eight years. Hammond cut the resident population from 6,000 to 5,000 and built a "baby school" for the very young. But state officials said he grew tired of the difficult job in June, and was transferred to the Rome (N.Y.) State School, where political and journalistic pressures are lighter.

Ristic, a graduate of medical school in Belgrade, took his psychiatric residency in England and came to this country in 1967 to work with the retarded in Minnesota.