

Willowbrook called 'among the worst'

By WILLIAM HUUS

An international medical authority who specializes in working with mental retardates testified yesterday in Brooklyn Federal Court that she considers Willowbrook State School "among the worst" of such facilities "anywhere."

"I don't see how they can call that kind of service in the medical building at Willowbrook a hospital — it's so medieval in there that their problems are

really acute," Mrs. Patricia McNelly told the court.

Her testimony came during a hearing into a case brought by several parents of patients at Willowbrook in conjunction with the New York Association for Retarded Children against the institution and the state. The plaintiffs are seeking a court order which would force the state to take steps to improve conditions at the facility for the retarded.

The plaintiffs had asked Mrs. McNelly to evaluate conditions at Willowbrook and present her findings before Federal Judge Orrin Judd.

Mrs. McNelly is director of nursing at the Central Wisconsin Colony and Training School, a facility in Madison, Wis., of similar size and purpose as Willowbrook. She is also chairman of the planning board of the American Association for Mental Deficiency and has traveled

throughout this country and Europe evaluating and studying the operations at various hospitals serving mental retardates.

In the Brooklyn court yesterday she presented a 40-page report on conditions she found at Willowbrook during a three-day visit she conducted from Nov. 11-13.

Her evaluation, as presented in the report and in answers to questions, was not flattering.

NOT ENOUGH

"There's not enough staff, there's not enough food and it's filthy in there," Mrs. McNelly told the court when asked what she found during her visit to Willowbrook.

"It seems as though those working there have given up hope that any changes will take place," she commented. "I found no use of any new resources or techniques being used now in facilities elsewhere."

The nursing director said she has seen the use of the "team approach" in other mental retardation hospitals which had problems and claimed that such a technique often improved conditions considerably in a year's time by bringing the patients into closer contact with the staff.

"But at Willowbrook, almost nothing is being done," she added.

Mrs. McNelly's harshest charges were leveled against the health and sanitary conditions at Willowbrook, which she termed "terrible," and she spent some time blasting the "basic lack of hygiene."

CITES UNCLEANLINESS

She cited the general uncleanliness she found in the wards, the dining facilities and the medical rooms and commented that there was an unhealthy odor throughout the facility.

"I saw one dining room that was alive with bugs; other rooms were crawling with roaches," she told Judd. I saw 12 patients sitting on the floor of a toilet room unsupervised. They were playing in water that had overflowed from the toilets and was covering the floor."

She said she found human waste on the floor in several rooms.

Mrs. McNelly also told the court that she found examples of unwise health practices during her evaluation visit.

"I saw some children who had been mummified (in special clothing) to protect themselves from self-abuse. But they were left in a playroom and were easy victims for the abuse of other patients," she explained.

Mrs. McNelly then told the court that she saw children with cerebral palsy who were lying on their backs in beds "staring at the ceiling."

CAUSES PROBLEMS

She complained that this is medically dangerous since lying on one's back causes respiratory problems for cerebral palsy victims and also speeds up deterioration of bones and muscles rather than helping the patient.

She concluded by telling the court that, in her opinion, Willowbrook is not properly using the attendants it has and desperately needs more staff, particularly nurses.

Mrs. McNelly said that, to operate under minimum standards, the facility would have to increase its number of nurses from the present total of 150 to "at least 422."

She said attendants could then be permanently assigned to groups of patients, thus developing personalized care that would allow the staff to notice any changes, medically or emotionally, that the patients might undergo.

She said such personalized and adequate supervision of the patients is "impossible with the present shortage of care" at Willowbrook.

The hearing was adjourned and Judd is expected to hear testimony from several other witnesses before the case concludes.