



Seven-year-old Donna Albenese, whose leg was broken for four hours before anyone noticed, lies in her bed at Willowbrook State School. S.I. Advance Photo by Everett R. Harvey

Willowbrook patient suffered in silence

By EVERETT R. HARVEY

No one will ever know how much pain was felt by Donna Albenese — a 7-year-old, 27-pound child, a beautiful doll you'd love to hold in your arms — the day her leg was broken in Ward D of Building 26 in the Willowbrook State School. That was the first step in what was termed during a staff meeting at Willowbrook as "unfortunate mishap, an accident." The second step in the chain of events to follow was that the break wasn't discovered until nearly four hours later, when the leg began to swell noticeably.

Donna, a patient at Willowbrook for six years, can't talk. She can't hold her head up, and she can't move a muscle in her body. She has to be kept in diapers. Donna is the oldest of three daughters and a son of Alexander and Arlene Albenese of 15 East Augusta Ave., Great Kills. The other children, Richard 5; Valerie 2, and Arlene, 11 months, are normal. According to the report filed by the parents with police and concurred in by Dr. Miodrag Ristich, the institution's director since October 1972, whose attitude was cooperative, the following was the latest in a series of incidents that have happened

to Donna during her six-year stay at Willowbrook. It was 4:30 p.m., Dec. 21, and children were playing in Ward D, Building 26. Donna was on a mattress. William Nelson, an attendant, wheeled in a food cart and, while manipulating the unit into position, stepped back on Donna's left leg. A nurse examined Donna, but found nothing wrong. No doctor was called. At 8:10 p.m., a nurse on Donna's floor noticed that the child's left leg was swelling. She called a doctor, and Donna was taken down to the X-ray room where it was learned that

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the leg was broken. The leg was placed in a temporary splint.

Sometime after 9 p.m., Donna's parents were called but since they were out shopping, the message was left with a baby sitter.

They arrived home around 11:15 p.m., got the message, called the institution and learned that there had been "a serious accident."

They rushed over to the institution and stayed with Donna until after 1 a.m.

Sometime during the following morning, an orthopedic consultant to the hospital arrived and placed Donna's leg in a plaster cast that reached half-way to her thigh.

There was talk that Donna might have to be moved to the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton.

It wasn't until Christmas Day at 3:30 p.m. that Donna was moved to the Clifton hospital and her parents notified.

There had been complications.

At the hospital, the parents learned that the bone in her leg had separated. This was four days after the leg was broken.

Donna has been placed in a body cast, but the doctors there don't know, as yet, whether corrective surgery will be necessary.

Dr. Ristich was asked by the Advance why a child in Donna's condition—apparent total immobility would be placed on a mattress on a floor in the first place.

"I'll give you a reason," said Dr. Ristich, "and that is that being in a crib and being confined does not encourage

exploration; that even people who are quite handicapped are better off in an environment where they can creep and crawl and mingle with other kids.

"One has to spend a couple of years in these wards — and I've seen a lot of kids like this, who can't stand up, who can't even crouch, they notice one another . . .

"In other words, that I'm prepared to defend, not in a defensive way, but the fact that a child like that was on a mattress in the play area and not in the crib all the time is not reprehensible."

Dr. Ristich said that he has no grounds for any type of harsh, disciplinary action but that "certainly the ward attendants will be talked to about the consequences that can occur, warned and cautioned about the extent of care that is needed in moving around such an area."

But the Christmas Eve incident is not the only happening at Willowbrook that has upset Donna's parents, who kept a record of such "accidents."

In March 1969, they found Donna beaten and scratched. A staff doctor ventured that she

did this to herself.

In May 1971, her nose was distorted and her eyes were blackened. There was no explanation.

In September 1971, they found her with a cut over the left eye and were told that another child had struck her.

In October 1971, they found her with bites over the chest, back and face. The explanation was that other children did it.

In May 1972, they found her body with several bruises. There was no explanation.

Last September, they found her left hand burned. Her hand had fallen against a radiator and she was unable to pull it away, even as a reflex action.

The cost of keeping Donna at Willowbrook can be expensive, depending upon the income and expenses of the patient's family.

Many of the patients at Willowbrook require total care, including individual feeding.

But with Willowbrook under attack in the press for the past two years, under surveillance by the federal government, accidents, no matter how unfortunate or undeliberate, such as Donna has experienced, are difficult to understand.