



Traineable youngster is at work under care of Marilyn Desty.

News photo by Jim Romano

Parents sometimes complain that enough isn't being done on this score. The doctor replies: "It's terribly easy outside to say something should be done. But how do we do it?"

"It's a management problem. Those who are naive can easily say: 'Get three teachers.' But you have to put them through recruitment, orientation, get the space, get the equipment. You have to plan a year ahead and find the money. That's reality. We're trying to provide first-rate care and if it doesn't come about, it won't be because we haven't got the bumps, bruises and scratches" from trying.

Another Willowbrook problem is reported incidents of patient abuse of residents by staff, as well as employe harassment of other employes, vandalism and theft.

"In all cases," Sheldon said, "you have to have proof. There are rules and regulations and you can't just fire an employe because someone may not like the way he combs his hair. Witnesses have to testify. There has to be evidence. Due process is aimed to protect the good but it sometimes keeps in the system those who are less than good.

"This isn't only a Willowbrook phenomenon," the doctor noted. "It's a human one. Where you have employes of good will, you'll also have a small core of sadists, bullies, 'I-don't-give-a-damn' types to contend with."

Population Down to 3,300

Only a week ago an attendant in Building 8 complained of being threatened and harassed. The incident stirred up a clamor by parents who criticized Willowbrook for "lack of concern."

"The concern is there. It's the proof we must have," Sheldon said.

Building 8, the doctor admits, is not one of Willowbrook's best. Lack of supervision is the reason given by both doctor and staff.

At a recent visit, Sheldon noted that the residents were on one side during a recreation period. The staff were on the other.

It shouldn't be that person who stays with the resident," he said. "When an attendant doesn't do anything, he or she becomes apathetic and morale goes down."

Morale certainly seemed to be down in Building 8 where employes voiced their discontent openly.

Nancy Begley, ward supervisor, complained of being harassed by other employes. "There's a breakdown in supervision," she admitted. "Employe morale is low."

Around 1960 the number of residents at Willowbrook was about 6,500. By the time of the scandal of early 1972, the number had been reduced by the administration to about 5,500, but the number of staff had been cut even more drastically because of budget shortages.

Now there are 3,300 residents, according to Dr. Moidrag Ristich, director of the center. Of these, most are from New York City, a few from upstate and approximately 180 from Staten Island. For nearly three years there have been no new admissions.

Ristich said, "We will not even consider admitting patients" until the number of residents is reduced to 2,970.

At Willowbrook, most tried to stay. The reason? One attendant in Building 13 put it this way: "You've got to be dedicated."

Page 2 of
2 pages