

PARENT TESTIFIES ON WILLOWBROOK

Says a Resident, 23, Choked
to Death After Eating
'Substitute Meal'

By JILL GERSTON

The president of the parents' association of the Willowbrook State School for the Mentally Retarded testified yesterday that a 25-year-old male resident choked to death last Tuesday evening after finishing a "substitute meal" of bread and potatoes.

Testifying in Federal Court in Brooklyn, Anthony Pinto, the president of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children at Willowbrook, said it was the third incident since August in which a resident had died by choking on food.

In a hearing before Judge Orrin G. Judd in a suit that seeks to have Willowbrook closed, Mr. Pinto described the resident as an "overanxious eater" who had a history of stuffing food into his mouth.

According to Mr. Pinto, the resident was fed a substitute dinner of mashed potatoes, bread and cake because the scheduled dinner of pork, carrots, pudding and milk was unavailable because of food shortage. After finishing the meal, he said, the young man began gobbling bread, which an attendant tried to remove by forcing his mouth open with a key. A doctor was summoned, but by the time he arrived the resident had choked to death.

Asked to comment on Mr. Pinto's testimony, Dr. Ranganasamy Natarajan, the deputy director of clinical medical services at Willowbrook, confirmed that the patient had died by choking but said that he had no report of an attendant using a key to try to remove food. He said an investigation was in progress to determine what diet had been prescribed for the patient and what was actually served to him for dinner on Oct. 29.

'Continuing Problem'

Mr. Pinto said the shortage of food and inadequate staffing were "continuing" problems at the Staten Island institution. He was one of more than a dozen witnesses to testify on behalf of the parents of patients at Willowbrook and the State Association for Retarded Children, who are the plaintiffs in the suit against the state of New York.

The court also heard testimony from a ward supervisor and a doctor who are employed at Willowbrook.

The ward supervisor, who testified without being identified, said that the housekeeping staff had to buy their own supplies because the institution did not provide adequate cleaning equipment. She added that the general level of sanitation was quite low, citing such conditions as leaking garbage pans, broken chairs, tables that are wiped but not washed, unflushed toilets and floors littered with food.

"The place is infested with mice — they walk around like they belong there," she said. "Sometimes the mice get into the food and nibble at bread, which is then served to the residents."

Intoxication Alleged

She said that there was a high rate of absenteeism among the ward attendants and that the patients were left without adequate supervision. The supervisor also alleged that some of the attendants came to work intoxicated and were lax in their attention to the residents' personal needs.

Another witness, Dr. Sita Krishna, who has been working at Willowbrook for two years, testified that the unsanitary conditions contributed to the high incidence of infectious and parasitic diseases among the residents. She deplored the lack of trained staff members, inadequate consulting services, insufficient medical equipment and the rudimentary continuing education program for Willowbrook doctors.

Earlier, Marie Moore, an expert in the care and management of the multiply handicapped, testified that most of the 3,200 patients at Willowbrook were not receiving proper care.

The hearing has been recessed until Nov. 11.