

# Solution to Willowbrook...

...How aware, Dr. Ristich how much did you know about the conditions and pressures at Willowbrook Developmental Center before you became director?

"I read in the medical journals, I saw certain things on the television, there was an hour on Dick Cavett ... so I knew, well ... I knew ... well, I can't say I knew QUITE what it was like.

"No one really knows until he has been through it."

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Thirty-six years old, with modishly long hair, gracious, thoughtful, insightful, a slightly tarnished administrator turned back to research, Dr. Miodrag Ristich was "through it" for two years as director of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

After those two beleaguered years, warding off conflicting interest groups, and less than two months after his hasty transfer to a senior research post at the Institute for Basic Research on Mental Retardation, Dr. Ristich steadfastly maintains today that the solution to Willowbrook "does not lie on that campus."

It lies, he feels, in the community, in the further reduction of overcrowding at the institution; it lies in the radical, precedent-setting computerization of patient medical records in which he is involved today.

The solutions, he stresses, will not come overnight. They will not come solely in response to pressure from competing groups. The solutions will come gradually, with "conceptualization and implementation."

That may give little satisfaction to frustrated parents and public. But, Dr. Ristich says, the conditions at Willowbrook are "no worse than any other institution of its size."

In fact, Dr. Ristich says, "in

some ways Willowbrook is better than many other places."

The constant demands for instant action, however, coupled with the knowledge that results do not come overnight, the claustrophobic constraints of his role as administrator, frustrated Ristich as Willowbrook director and, in part, led him to seek a new role — as researcher.

"I certainly didn't think I could clean up Willowbrook myself. Someone had to mind the store. Somebody had to keep the place going."

"But my time was constantly taken up by putting out brush fires. The director is supposed to be everywhere, supposed to show the flag."

In a recent four-hour interview with the Advance, the Yugoslavian-trained doctor described in halting English what it's like to show the flag as director of a nationally-spotlighted institution for the mentally retarded; what it's like to deal daily with the "lawlessness" of Willowbrook, with overwrought, raging parents, with a beseeching press corps., with the hot breath of the federal court breathing down one's administrative neck.

"I didn't enjoy it," Dr. Ristich says.

"Admittedly, I would have hoped for a better type of publicity than I got, but in the final analysis what matters is the reputation one has among one's peers.

"Both the public adulation and public notoriety are yesterday's news tomorrow. I don't think I have any personal regrets coming. It was an experience. In personal terms I've reached fairly favorable conclusions. I learned a lot."

And if he had to do it all over again?

"That's entirely hypothetical," Dr. Ristich says. But clearly he wants to answer

the question, a question which he undoubtedly has asked himself since his departure from the director's spot.

"I'd have to adopt a new approach," he admits. "I didn't swing the big stick as much as I could have. But two years ago ..." Ristic pauses, rubs his face. "Two years ago being rough wouldn't have done a damn thing.

"I could have varied my approach — been tougher, more demanding. I'm not at all sure it would have produced better results.

"At Willowbrook," Ristic says he learned, "there are limits to what you can get."

As a theoretician, Dr. Ristic says he was aware that concept takes time to put into practice. As an administrator he was aware that a director must be ready to "catch hell" from demanding public-consumer groups.

"The public administrator. I suppose, has to seek that point of minimum discomfort that he catches a certain amount of hell, but where the sum total of the two is the least. I don't know if that point exists," he says.

Statistics showing that in the past year eight state directors of the Department of Mental Hygiene facilities have resigned, back up the contention, Ristic says. "The community is mad as hell. They get a change of administration but that doesn't resolve the problem."

Dr. Ristic will readily admit that parent groups were a major headache during his two-year tenure, which began Oct. 2, 1972 when the Willowbrook "problem was becoming more acute every day" and ended Oct. 10, this year.

He also will admit that "the kinds of things they wanted done were plain impossible.

"Consumers want action, they want something done. At one

time parents were screaming they wanted screening on baby porches in one building. We got that done. It took a year.

"Then, however, there were other things they wanted which also take time. On the other hand, they realize that the institution responds to their pressure and they will always demand more.

"Consumers see that there is a change, but they also see that the changes are in response to their pressure. So that stimulates them to put more pressure."

The result? A dilemma. "You cannot ward off pressure by doing what they want because there is no end in sight to the kinds of things they want you to do.

"We could tell parents you can have a very fine service 40 hours a week if you want to take your children home nights and on weekends. And we also give you twice two weeks respite care so you can have a vacation, but if you want us to run a round-the-clock approach then you are imposing an entirely unproductive cost upon us.

"You make us pay people," Ristic says. "just to be there to watch your kids sleep."

Of course, Dr. Ristic adds, there will always be a number of people who require full-time institutionalization. There are, however, he says, some parents who "dump their children" in the institution.

Then, he says, "they yell, they rage ... they are concerned about their children, I suppose. But on the other hand, and I don't know how this will look in print, I have never hit below the belt and said this, but if the institution is so dreadful, why don't you take the child out?"

"In the beginning the entering was irrational," Ristic says. "It is no surprise in the end that the result was irrational."

Parents were only a part of Ristic's problems. State policy to reduce the size of

Willowbrook — population was 5,000 in 1972; today it is 2,600 — presented another dilemma for Ristic, the administrator.

"How does one improve performance at a dying institution?" he asks. "Organizations want to grow. The leader is followed if there is growth that opens up possibility for improvement and opportunity.

"It is very difficult to lead people and to expect them to follow when you are continually berating the organization. And if you are honest you can't very well phrase it."

Along with the demise of staff morale, the dwindling size of Willowbrook brought other problems for Ristic. The patient that Willowbrook released were the "givers", Ristic said, the retarded who could produce and take care of themselves.

That left, of course, the "takers," the patients who needed constant care, feeding, toilet clean up. The population was decreased, but the problems remained more visible and existent than ever, Ristic said.

When the furor of Willowbrook first came to the fore in late 1971, the worst severely handicapped mentally retarded, living a despicable

existence, were the focus of press and public concern

Almost two years after the furor subsided those same severely retarded remained in the institution. Some saw this as a sign that Willowbrook had not improved.

Dr. Stuart L. Keill, the man most responsible probably for putting pressure on Dr. Ristic to leave the director's spot, says that certainly Willowbrook improved in Ristic's two years.

Dr. Keill has implied, however, that Ristic left a lot to be desired as an administrator.

Ristic, with some bitterness, however, disputes any claim of administrative incompetence on his part. "No one could prove that," he says. The real reason for Keil attempting to push Ristic out of his director's spot was policy differences, Ristic says.

"I could have dug in my heels ... I could have fought it out. But that was neither in my best interests nor the best interests of the institution."

Dr. Ristic chose to transfer, to go back to research. "I can do much more here. That's been reinforced already."