

Willowbrook aide: Charges 'hard to believe'

"It's hard to believe," is all a Willowbrook Developmental Center official had to say this morning about an Albany newspaper report detailing employe drunkenness, unsanitary conditions and lack of medical care at the Island institution.

But Donald Fleming, deputy director for institutional administration at Willowbrook, said he would look into the charges before commenting further.

The Albany Times Union said yesterday that one of its reporters toured the center last month and saw "drunken attendants, wards without supervision, broken windows, unlocked doors and children sitting in pools of urine."

During the six and a half hour tour, the reporter "never saw a doctor, even in the facility's hospital," the newspaper said.

In connection with another charge dealing with drug pilferage in state mental institutions, Fleming said, "we're not plagued with that particular problem."

The account of the tour is part of the Times Union's series of copyrighted stories critical of the Mental Hygiene Department.

The newspaper charged that \$2.4 million worth of drugs are stolen each year from the department's facilities. It said it had obtained a confidential agency report dealing with the problem, a report it quotes as saying that drug "inventory shrinkage at the ward level ranges from 10 to 50 per cent depending on the geographical location, with the mean within a range of 30 per cent."

Author of the report, Eugene E. Scerebini, the department's pharmacy consultant, is quoted by the newspaper as saying employes regard drug pilferage as "a fringe benefit." Scerebini said, "It's for their own personal use."

The report found that "at the present time there is no accurate accountability" for drugs at the ward level, the newspaper said.

The Times Union, saying it conducted unannounced inspections of agency facilities and numerous interviews, said the department "stands today fragmented and leaderless, a monument to waste and inefficiency."

It claimed the department exerts little control over its facilities or employes and that few performance standards exist.

The newspaper quoted the pharmacy consultant's report as saying that new jobs in the budget for the next fiscal year should help eliminate the drug problem.

Scerebini said the department's total budget for drugs is about \$8 million a year. He said police have not been called to investigate the thefts because "when we have shrinkage, it's always been shown it's not an organized thing."

He said his report led to the addition of 30 new pharmacists in the next budget.

He also said the department plans to initiate "unit dose medication," with each dose in its own wrapping. He added that pharmacists will be allowed to dispense a 24-hour supply only to their wards, as opposed to a five-day supply which can now be requisitioned.

Many people have access to areas where this supply of drugs is kept, Scerebini said, adding that "very limited help" in the wards is hindering attempts at stopping the pilferage.

Gov. Carey repeatedly has said the department would be the target of an overhaul and has named a Moreland Act commission to investigate health services in the state.