

Hepatitis scare used as blocking maneuver?

By ROBERT MIRALDI

A State Assembly task force on mental hygiene has expressed "grave concern" about the threat of a hepatitis epidemic caused by the dispersal of residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center into the community.

Willowbrook and Department of Mental Hygiene officials and hepatitis medical experts have said adamantly, however, that there is no threat and they fear that a "hepatitis scare" might be an effort to halt community placement.

The six-month-old federal court consent decree which has outlined radical changes at Willowbrook mandates the reduction of Willowbrook's present 2,729 population to 250 within six years and requires 200 community placements by April 1976.

Historically, the incidence of hepatitis at Willowbrook

has always been considerably higher than in the general population because of the facility's poor sanitary conditions, which have improved but still pose nagging problems.

The hepatitis concern apparently stems from two sources, a recent audit report released by state Controller Arthur Levitt, and fears being expressed by Dr. Kevin Cahill, Gov. Carey's top health adviser.

Reportedly, at a recent meeting in Albany to discuss staffing problems at the South Beach Psychiatric Center, Cahill repeatedly expressed his concern that as Willowbrook residents are dispersed the threat of a hepatitis epidemic increases.

Levitt's Oct. 12 audit report said "the potential for an infectious epidemic continues to exist because patients with suspected infectious diseases were not placed in interim isolation."

Robert C. Wertz, Republi-

can of Commack, L.I., chairman of the Assembly task force, said in a statement: "Given the current disorganized state of administration and data systems in the Department of Mental Hygiene, the possibility of a statewide epidemic generated by this kind of movement becomes very real and very frightening."

"Absolutely sure controls must be developed in the communities before we can comfortably relocate any hepatitis carriers," Wertz said.

Wertz said "it is hard to take this position at this time since we have consistently been in the forefront to humanize environments for the retarded and to develop appropriate solutions."

But, he added, "The rights and needs of (retarded) individuals must be very carefully balanced against the rights and safety of the community."

Presently there are over 200 residents of Willowbrook living in foster care homes. There are no group homes on Staten Island for the retarded, although one has been proposed for the New Brighton area and has met community opposition.

Assemblyman Guy Molinari, a member of the Wertz task force, said that while Staten Island "must find a place for its retarded in the community in home-like settings," Willowbrook must guarantee "absolute control over people who have had infectious disease or are carriers."

Dr. Rangasamy Natarajan, chief of medical affairs at Willowbrook, estimates that 10 to 15 per cent of Willowbrook's residents are active carriers of hepatitis. "I don't think that should pose a problem," said Dr. Natarajan, deputy director for clinical affairs since 1972.

As sanitary conditions have improved at Willowbrook, Dr. Natarajan said, the incidence

of hepatitis has decreased. There have been 7 cases of hepatitis in 1975, 15 in 1974, 28 in 1973 and 17 in 1972.

The problem has received intensive attention at Willowbrook and the center was the locale of a hepatitis conference April 14.

Dr. Natarajan says that foster parents who have custody of former Willowbrook residents who are active carriers are given explicit instruction on preventive hygiene techniques.

According to Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a parents' group, hepatitis at Willowbrook is under control—only because of intensive pressure placed on state officials by the parents.