

Fired Willowbrook MD says he'll fight order

Willowbrook MD vows to fight firing

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Dr. Rangasamy Natarajan, chief of medical affairs at Willowbrook Developmental Center since 1973, has been fired from his \$43,000-a-year post, it has been learned.

The 58-year-old Indian-born Natarajan, in bitter, somber tones, has confirmed the firing, calling it a "grave injustice," which he intends to fight in the courts.

"I am well qualified for my job. I know this place. I know the staff, the doctors, the residents' needs. I will fight this decision," Dr. Natarajan said.

"I cannot believe that after three years they are questioning my credentials," he declared.

Asked why he was being fired as of Nov. 20, Natarajan said: "Because I am the man he (Director Harold C. Piepenbrink) is afraid of.

"I am qualified," Natarajan said, but "he (Piepenbrink) is not qualified for his job. He should not have been appointed. He's not qualified.

"He does not know about mental retardation...who is retarded, who is not."

Dr. Natarajan said that Willowbrook's 2,279 retarded residents were "absolutely suffering" because of Piepenbrink and the "manner in which he has treated the medical, clinical staff."

Reached for comment, Piepenbrink said the decision "to terminate the provisional appointment" of Dr. Natarajan had been reached after discussion with state Department of Mental Hygiene's New York City regional director, Dr. Stuart L. Keill.

Piepenbrink said that since Natarajan had retained an attorney to initiate legal action against the state because of the firing, he could not comment on the reason for the termination "for fear of prejudicing any legal case."

The reason may have surfaced yesterday, however, in a letter to Natarajan's attorney, William D. Volin of Manhattan, stating that "it is not the intention of the director at Willowbrook nor of the department to continue this position" of deputy director for medical affairs.

Elimination of the position, Dr. Natarajan said yesterday, was "most disgraceful...nothing but dictatorship.

"The residents need medical attention more than anything else," said; Natarajan, who also supervises 45 staff physicians and 25 medical consultants.

The letter to Natarajan and his attorney was signed by Lawrence MacArthur, associate commissioner for the Department of Mental Hygiene.

Regional Director Keill said yesterday he was aware that Natarajan's deputy director's post was being eliminated but, he said, Piepenbrink would appoint a physician "who would direct medical affairs."

Dr. Natarajan, Keill said, "cannot provide the leadership that is needed at that administrative level." Dr. Keill said that although he had consulted with Piepenbrink about the possibility of hiring Natarajan as a permanent deputy director, the decision to terminate was made by Piepenbrink.

Keill called Natarajan a "decent gentleman and a good doctor," but said he agreed with Piepenbrink that a new chief medical officer was needed.

According to Dr. Natarajan, Piepenbrink informed him that the decision to hire another head medical officer was made by Keill.

"Somebody's telling a lie," Dr. Natarajan said.

Natarajan first learned of the firing in a letter from Dr. Keill to Piepenbrink in which the regional official said "the crucial job of clinical director...requires a most unusual kind of professional, one who combines considerable energy, creativity, dynamic interest in change and an in-depth knowledge of community affairs.

"I think also that it might be advisable, rather than have a



Rangasamy Natarajan

psychiatrist in such a position, that someone with a broad background in either internal medicine or pediatrics might be an appropriate balance ..."

Natarajan scoffs at the Keill letter, saying he is a qualified internist and that it has been under his supervision that the placement of over 250 Willowbrook residents has been made in the community.

Natarajan points with pride to the doubling of the facility's medical staff, the hiring of qualified, licensed doctors, a reduction in infectious diseases and "drastic improvement" in hygiene conditions as accomplishments.

"On my first tour of the buildings with Dr. Ristich," Natarajan said, "The feces and urine were ankle deep in some buildings. People were naked. I said that must be halted."

The firing of Dr. Natarajan, a popular figure at Willowbrook called "Nat" by his associates, completes the sweep out of office of the three top-level administrators who had run Willowbrook for almost three years:

¶ Dr. Miodrag Ristich, the former director who was transferred under pressure Oct. 10, 1974, for what was termed "poor administration," a charge he denied emphatically.

¶ Donald E. Fleming, the former deputy director of administration who was demoted to personnel director last Sept. 16, taking a \$14,000 cut in pay. Fleming was demoted because he did not meet qualifications for the post.

¶ And Dr. Natarajan, who was hired by Ristich in 1972, served during the turbulent years when Willowbrook was the focus of massive press and public scrutiny and was the man in charge of all clinical programs. "He was as much director as was Ristich," said one source.

Dr. Natarajan's sweeping control over operations at Willowbrook began to decline shortly after Piepenbrink took over as director in March. The new director appointed five deputy directors—one for each borough—and the team leaders and unit chiefs of Willowbrook buildings began to report to those deputies, not to Natarajan.

Shortly after Piepenbrink came to Willowbrook, Dr. Na-

tarajan says, Regional Director Keill told him to talk "about your status" with Piepenbrink.

"We sat down and I said I had no problem with him and could work with him. I asked him then about permanent status. He said he would let me know. I wondered about my status at that point, Natarajan said."

Dr. Natarajan was hired by Ristich Jan. 18, 1973, as a provisional or temporary deputy director of clinical matters. In October 1974 Natarajan took—and passed—a civil service examination that made him eligible for a permanent appointment.

No appointment was forthcoming, however, a fact underscored by yesterday's letter from Commissioner MacArthur. "They waited a year to give this position," Natarajan said yesterday.

Dr. Natarajan and his attorney contend that, according to civil service law, if nine months pass without a canvass of the civil service rolls the provisional deputy director, if he has passed the state exam, becomes a permanent deputy director.

Under that reasoning, Natarajan would be permanent. The elimination of the post of deputy director, clinical, at Willowbrook, however, may throw a kink in Natarajan's legal plans.

"I would expect justice in America," Natarajan said, adding he intends to press the legal action. "I feel the courts will right this wrong."

Natarajan came to the U.S. in 1958 for a one-year fellowship at Harvard University, but ended up in private practice in the Midwest and even-

tually in the state mental hygiene system.

Dr. Natarajan said he fears now that many of the Willowbrook doctors who he has hired and who have worked closely with him will walk out or leave if he is terminated—a contention discounted by other Willowbrook observers.

Dr. Natarajan further feels that if he leaves, the medical care at Willowbrook will deteriorate. "He's entitled to his opinion," Piepenbrink commented. "I don't share it."