

# Willowbrook doctors back colleague; rap working conditions

By ROBERT MIRALDI

On the heels of the firing of the chief of medical affairs at Willowbrook Developmental Center, the state facility's 55 doctors have voted unanimously to support the deposed Dr. Rangasamy Natarajan and have deplored elimination of the position of deputy director for clinical affairs at Willowbrook.

An executive committee representing 40 staff physicians and 15 dentists yesterday issued a resolution demanding that Dr. Natarajan's post of deputy director "shall now and in the future be maintained."

Repeating an earlier plea made to Gov. Carey, the staff doctors also pleaded that medical people be allowed to make medical decisions at the institution, which houses 2,279 retarded residents.

Although the doctors have not considered a mass walkout or strike, they said that if working conditions do not improve the staff might resign en masse. "There are other jobs," one doctor said, "but that's not what we want."

"We haven't asked for a battle," a staff dentist said, "until today."

The doctors, who asked not to be identified because they fear "continued harassment" from administrators, cited numerous incidents of "meddling" by non-medical administrators which, they claim, have had serious adverse effects on the residents.

"We are not providing optimal medical care," a staff pediatrician said. "We spend entirely too much time clearing up administrative misunderstandings and misconceptions."

The public demands made by the doctors yesterday culminate a two-year struggle between administration and physicians, which according to the doctors "has not improved an inch" since the administration of Director Harold C. Piepenbrink took over in March.

The doctors, after meeting with Piepenbrink in April, wifed Gov. Carey Aug. 6 "to protest the prevailing unprofessional and progressively deteriorating working conditions for the medical staff" at Willowbrook.

"The non-medical administrative staff is persistently and constantly meddling, obstructing and disrupting the normal working responsibilities and duties of the medical staff," the wire to Carey said.

The doctors charged that non-medical staff members "are usurping the medical line of responsibilities and are daily interfering in medical practice and illegally and ignorantly directing, supervising and infringing on our medical duties..."

"Mr. Piepenbrink's indifference and silence and his policy of total isolation and restricted involvement of the medical staff is not only morale breaking and professionally humiliating but may also precipitate medicolegal problems," the memo said.

The Aug. 6 plea to Gov. Carey brought a one paragraph response Sept. 17. In a letter to the medical staff, Carey said Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence Kolb had informed him that a borough chief for Staten Island had met with Dr. Sita Gopal Krishna, vice president of the medical staff.

Dr. Krishna, reached at home last night, denied that she has ever met with anyone representing either the governor or the department.

The doctors cited the following incidents where non-medical staff has attempted to usurp and make medical decisions to the detriment of the residents:

Unit chiefs ordering special diets for residents when, the doctors felt, the diet was medically unsound.

Non-medical staff ordering sophisticated medical tests that "they probably

picked up in Reader's Digest," said a staff psychiatrist, who added that the tests were "unnecessary."

A non-medical deputy director refusing to allow a physician to transfer two residents out of an acute medical ward, forcing the physician to appeal to clinical director Natarajan.

Unit chiefs ordering physicians to prescribe certain sedative medications "just to keep the resident quiet, instead of offering one-to-one, therapeutic care."

Physicians requesting an administrator to remove his dog from inside a ward because of possible spread of infectious disease, but the administrator refusing the request.

Non-medical administrators calling in medical consultants to see residents without consultation with staff physicians.

Doctors having to argue for up to 20 minutes to convince an administrator to send an ambulance for a resident.

The doctors feel that many of these administration versus physician arguments would be resolved—or at least regulated—by a set of medical bylaws which have been drawn up by the physicians, given to Piepenbrink and, they say, are now in Albany awaiting approval.

The doctors claim they submitted the bylaws June 10 and on Sept. 5 Piepenbrink said that "with minor corrections" the bylaws would be approved by the end of that week.

Yesterday however, the physicians say they received a call from Mrs. Mary Wilbur, program analyst for the Department of Mental Hygiene, saying that the bylaws were in Albany and that numerous aspects of the bylaws were in conflict with civil service laws.

Administration-physician disputes can now be settled by Dr. Natarajan, but he has been fired as of Nov. 20 and the doctors fear what will happen. "Where do we go then? What do we do? We must have an executive level clinical director," the doctors said, fearing that more than the 30 doctors who have already left the staff in the last two years will also leave.

The doctors say the firing of Natarajan is a move "to suppress the power of the medical staff." They do not blame Piepenbrink for the physician-administration battle, but say that he "is not fully aware of what is going on."

Piepenbrink will not comment on why Natarajan was fired or his position eliminated because of a court action instituted Wednesday by the 58-year-old Natarajan.

In a statement issued yesterday, the doctors said: "All matters pertaining to medical administrative problems are best administered by physicians and it is universally accepted and time-honored practice, professionally, morally and ethically appropriate that the needs of a medical staff are best understood and tendered by medical peers."

The question, one doctor said is "when does medicine stop and administration take over."