

Ex-director defends Willowbrook experiment

The writer of the following article, a psychiatrist who lives in Port Richmond Center, is a former director of the Willowbrook Developmental Center, then known as Willowbrook State School.

By HAROLD H. BERMAN

On Sept. 26, the Advance published an excerpt from a book written by an assistant professor of philosophy at Wagner College, headlined "Human experimentation at Willowbrook immoral? Researchers said No!" Were I to allow this illogical and false reasoning, false accusations and false acclamations to go unanswered, I should be derelict in my obligation to the parents of the children who were entrusted to my care at Willowbrook State School when I was director and to the doctors who worked with me, both the resident doctors and the consulting doctors, to my nurses, to my employes who worked far beyond the call of duty to render service to our patients.

This book is a total and complete disservice to the cause of mental deficiency. Where should I begin? He talks about "inoculations being dangerous and committing assault and battery on people." He talks about "immunizations being such that they are victimizing the recipients." Let me ask this reverend gentleman, who is wrapped in his divine cloak and makes divine pronouncements, "Dear Sir, Were you vaccinated against smallpox? Were you vaccinated against measles? Do you have children? Was your daughter, if you are so blessed, before she got married, vaccinated against German measles so that she would have immunity against giving birth to a mongoloid? These are introductions of organisms into the body."

You may go way back to Jenner when he first inoculated people with what was then known as cowpox. He made people sick with cowpox, but in making them sick with cowpox, he made everybody, including those who were inoculated, immune against smallpox. This professor might shake his head in amazement with Wagner von Jaureg who administered malaria to patients who were sick with syphilitic brain disease. Following his findings, I made people sick with

malaria to cure their syphilis of the brain and successfully so.

When I was in medical school, I was taught that tuberculosis was hereditary, and when I came into state service in psychiatry, the fact that the prevalence of tuberculosis within a mental institution, of 5 per cent, was accepted as wonderful. It was supposed to be associated with mental sickness but we found that it was being transmitted from newly admitted patients to other patients. We eradicated that and in the course of this eradication we used tuberculin.

If we accepted the professor's reasoning that no assault should be made on sickness, then what are we doctors working for? What are the nurses working for? What are the people in the hospitals working for? To be upbraided and to be challenged by such illogical reasoning based on a false premise?

Is it a false premise? Yes. Basically and fundamentally his premise is absolutely false. He attacks the staff of New York Medical College. Does he or anybody think that this indefinite "staff of New York Medical College" was working in a vacuum? Does he pronounce that there is no benefit to the individual receiving what he calls experiments, what I call immunization?

If he had had the duty to stand beside the autopsy table the way I did and be there when my pathologist was performing an autopsy on one of my poor patients who had died, and have the pathologist turn and pronounce the cause of death as being broncho-pneumonia or that the cause of death was nephritis, which was all we could prove at that time, he would not be so dogmatic. But my pathologist and I and the other doctors around that table knew that the cause of that death was in some unknown way due to what was then known as catarrhal jaundice.

If this professor wants to go back to those days, and have an institution run on those principles, then the advancement in the study of disease should be halted. You do not want doctors, you want exactly what you are getting at Willowbrook now. School teachers and social workers and psychologists are running an institution caring for sick people, and believe me, mentally defec-

tive patients are sick in spite of all the pronouncements to the contrary made by the modern trend.

Let me advise about the parents of my patients when I was director of the institution. When I came first to Willowbrook State School in 1949, a delegation of parents asked to see me. When I told them that they did not have to ask to see me, to just walk in, the door was always open, they were amazed. They told me that no doctor before had allowed anybody to talk. The sum and substance of that meeting was that they delivered me, not an ultimatum, but a pronouncement that they wanted me and my staff to work toward the end that what had happened to them would never happen to any other family.

How different from the loud mouthed people of today, who seem to have such control and such a throttle over the operation of an institution like Willowbrook Developmental Center. My people suffered the pangs of conscience, of guilt, of remorse. They went through all of the misery associated with the disappointment of parents who have born to them a child hopelessly mentally deficient or hopelessly deformed. They felt the sense of guilt as though this unfortunate birth into their family was punishment enough and they wanted to prevent it happening again.

Now, Mr. Professor, put yourself in their place. When I arrived at Willowbrook we had a resident population of about 200. This population was expanded to about 6,500. Where did these patients come from? Do you know? They came from attics, from closets, from basements, from all sorts of restrictions and concealments. Mental deficiency bore a strong stigma. It was a shame and a disgrace. Thank God that by our work and teachings, we were able to remove a great deal of that stigma prevalent then. The family had to live in secrecy and fear of exposure that there was a mental defective in the family. These people came from all walks of life, from all five boroughs and from Long Island. One mental defective member residing in the family made that family overcrowded in every sense of the word.

Willowbrook was originated to give these people relief, and during my administration it was our opinion that if there was going to be any overcrowding,