

Administrators deny 'experiment' label Willowbrook seeks OK of questionable drugs

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Administrators at Willowbrook Developmental Center have endorsed a plan to use a variety of potent chemical substances on some mentally retarded residents in an effort to modify their behavior.

The use of such mood-changing drugs — including two so-called "psychoactive" chemicals not sanctioned for the purposes for which they would be given — is being spurred by the conviction that other methods of dealing with mentally retarded children who have behavioral problems have failed.

Willowbrook administrators deny the program would constitute an experiment or research project. Instead, they argue, it would be a form of "innovative treatment" or a series of "therapeutic trials."

The federal government, however, believes the use of the substances in question, which often produce undesirable physical side effects, may not be indicated to curb abusive or aggressive behavior, particularly in children, and would thus require federal approval.

Using the drugs in these cases, according to Dr. David Davis of the Food and Drug Administration, appears to be experimental, and intrusive chemical research is specifically forbidden at Willowbrook under a 1975 court order.

Under a plan advanced by a prominent child psychiatrist at Bellevue Medical Center, Dr. Magda Campbell, who is also a professor at the New York University School of Medicine, some of 540 adolescents at Willowbrook deemed to have psychiatric or emotional problems would be given a variety of behavior-control drugs, while scientists monitored their condition.

According to Dr. Philip Ziring, Willowbrook's deputy director of clinical services, the aim would be to see which drug, if any, helps the individual.

Scientists agree that the drugs in question — including the chemicals lithium carbonate and haloperidol — in

some cases may diminish agitation or lessen psychotic episodes, thus reducing symptoms rather than diseases.

They may enable a person to function satisfactorily in a supervised atmosphere, but they would never, in themselves, constitute cures, scientists say.

It is common knowledge that the use of psychoactive drugs at Willowbrook and other institutions for the retarded has been increasing in recent years, in spite of a growing mound of evidence that these chemical substances significantly inhibit learning ability and produce depression.

An estimated 50 per cent of Willowbrook's 2,400 residents are maintained on drugs, according to unofficial estimates given by staff members.

The chemicals most frequently administered for individuals deemed "problem cases" are chlorpromazine marketed as Thorazine, and thioridazine, marketed as Mellaril.

And although the use of Thorazine and Mellaril are controversial in themselves, the two new compounds proposed for use may be more risky, scientists say, because the effects they have, and the types of symptoms they help, remain unclear.

Lithium carbonate, marketed under the name Lithium, has been used since the late 1960s as a drug of choice in treating the manic phase of manic-depressive illness, a mental disorder generally confined to middle or later-adult life.

Although there is some evidence, according to psychiatrists, that the drug helps in cases of childhood schizophrenia, it is not yet recognized for such a use by the FDA.

But there is no conclusive evidence that lithium salts aid persons with aggressive, abusive or hyperactive behavior — mentally retarded or otherwise.

It is known that the drug is powerful. Side effects include weakness, slurred speech, hand tremor, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, excessive thirst and urination.

Haloperidol, marketed as Haldol, is slightly less controversial. A psychoactive substance 50 times as potent as the more traditional Thorazine, it is recommended for no one under 16 years old, according to scientific reports.

It is a drug that helps order disordered thinking in schizophrenics, although its precise mechanism of action has never been established.

Proponents say that because of its potency, a smaller dose is required for the management of schizophrenia than other drugs. But critics argue the power of the drug merely intensifies the unpleasant and sometimes serious side effects, which include lethargy, excessive shaking, dehydration and the creation of a "zombie-like" condition.

Both of the drugs, Dr. Ziring himself admits, have "some risks." Others contend, however, that if the drugs are administered improperly, permanent impairment and even death can result.

Using the institutionalized retarded without gaining the informed consent of a qualified party — in which the risks and the experimental nature of the drug's use are outlined — is professionally unethical and may be illegal, critics of the proposed treatment are charging.

Dr. Ziring, a respected clinician on staff at Willowbrook since the spring, believes, on the other hand, that the drug treatment proposed for some mentally retarded adolescents at Willowbrook is for their own good.

"It is our desire to see if there may be a place here for Lithium" Haldol and other behavior-control drugs, Dr. Ziring said in an interview.

He stressed that if the plan is approved, presumably by a series of review boards, potential candidates for Lithium and the other drugs would be screened with precision and their intake levels monitored carefully.

"We are in no frame of mind to do chemically intrusive research," Dr. Ziring maintained, answering mounting criticism from parents. "The availability for other forms of treatment are just not there... We have to try to stop (some