

Editorial page

Our opinion

No room for experiments

A decade ago, living conditions at the Willowbrook Developmental Center — then known as Willowbrook State School — were intolerable. Patients spent lifetimes locked up on wards, many were subjected to outrageous abuses and rehabilitation programs were virtually nonexistent.

The horrors that were to become synonymous with the word Willowbrook were, of course, subsequently uncovered by the Advance and many concerned individuals, and because of those efforts many of the past wrongs have now been righted. In fact, under the terms of the historic Willowbrook Consent Decree, the institution will for all practical purposes cease to exist within a few years from now.

But it now seems that many of the significant gains made in recent years are in danger of being eclipsed by a proposal to use a variety of potent, mood-altering drugs on some mentally retarded Willowbrook residents in an effort to modify their behavior.

The proposal, being developed by several physicians after a meeting last week, would involve the use of

several psychoactive drugs in the primary psychiatric treatment of some Willowbrook residents. Because the administration of the drugs would be considered part of the patients' treatment, the consent of their families, guardians or of the courts would not be required.

An earlier plan, under which some of the same psychoactive drugs would have been given to 30 adolescents at Willowbrook on an experimental basis, was withdrawn by the institution's officials in response to objections raised by the court-appointed Willowbrook Review Panel.

The panel expressed fears that the powerful drugs — including Lithium and Thorazine — would be used "in lieu of a plan for provision of psychiatric services" to hundreds of Willowbrook residents.

That is the polite way of saying that the patients might well be maintained in a sort of perpetual stupor so that other treatment need not be provided. And that sounds very much like the kind of "warehousing" of retarded individuals prevalent at Willowbrook before long-overdue reforms were initiated in response to public outrage.

It is, unfortunately, impossible to offer a full and impartial evaluation of the latest proposal at this point simply because proponents of the plan have refused to make its details public.

Secrecy surrounding such a highly controversial subject as the use of powerful and potentially dangerous drugs on those individuals whose lives have been entrusted to the state cannot be tolerated.

Indeed, continued secrecy makes the Department of Mental Hygiene's plan for the administration of drugs to Willowbrook residents seem very much like the Central Intelligence Agency's clandestine, cloak-and-dagger drug experiments that have just come to light.

There will undoubtedly be vigorous debate over the new drug administration plan in the months ahead, and DMH officials can best guarantee a full and frank exchange of public and professional viewpoints by making all the details of the proposal public immediately.

If officials are afraid to subject the plan to the weight of public opinion, however, then they should withdraw it at once.