

# Use of mood drugs going on for years at Willowbrook

By NEAL WIESNER

The use of psychoactive drugs at Willowbrook Developmental Center and other institutions for the mentally retarded has been widespread for years in spite of increasing evidence that these drugs, under long-term administration at least, significantly inhibit learning ability as well as produce depression.

One source, who had been until recently a ward supervisor at Willowbrook and is now working at an upstate facility for the retarded, estimated that at least half of Willowbrook's residents were on some kind of daily medication. Administration, he explained, is usually initiated in response to a violent episode by a resident.

"The real problem," he said, "is not that they're given the drugs in the first place, but that there is no attempt to ever get them off them." He felt it likely that residents who have received the drugs continuously for more than five years were not uncommon.

A spokesman for the developmental center said administrators feel the use of such drugs is "sufficiently monitored by ourselves and the (Willowbrook) Review Panel."

"We do have a handle on the use of these drugs and we would hope the parents would come to quarterly meetings to gain an understanding of the drug regimens prescribed," the spokesman added.

She said Willowbrook does not think there is "an abuse or overuse" of the substances, but added that to disclose the percentage and the quantity of drugs administered would be a breach of medical confidentiality.

In addition, the spokesman said, Willowbrook feels the use is "perhaps even less than in other state institutions."

But the ward supervisor contended: "You can always tell the ones on Thorazine." You've got to be careful when you take them outside, they get really burned in just a few hours in the sun."

Sensitivity to light is one of the side

effects of long term administration of chlorpromazine (CPZ), which is also known by the trade name Thorazine. There is an increased likelihood of permanent visual impairment in those who demonstrate this reaction. In the 1971 edition of the American Medical Association's Drug Evaluations, it is noted: "A dark purplish brown pigmentation induced by light has been reported in hospitalized patients who were given large amounts (0.5 to 1.5 grams daily) of CPZ or other phenothiazines for three to five years.

"Ocular changes (e.g. opacities of the cornea and lens) also were observed in some of these patients."

Jeffery Goldsmith, who worked for a short time as a ward aide in Willowbrook's Building 13 two years ago, reported that while he could only say with certainty that one-third of the residents he had contact with were receiving daily doses of psychoactive drugs, his understanding was that well over half were on daily doses of the medication.

He also noted observing side effects of varying intensity in most of those residents. The side effects of the medications frequently given to the retarded are often thought to be characteristic of the retarded. The AMA cited them as being tremors, rigidity, a shuffling gait, postural abnormalities, pill-rolling movements of the fingers, mask-like faces and excessive salivation.

"At the time I thought the medication was supposed to relieve those symptoms, but they kept on receiving the medication and no one ever got better," Goldsmith said.

Learning ability is now thought by an increasing number of psychopharmacologists to be significantly impaired by CPZ and haloperidol (HP), trade name Haldol, two of the drugs most commonly used at Willowbrook. CPZ, which persists in the body up to a year after administration has ceased, is well known for its ability to produce severe depression.

In "A Primer on Drug Action," (Julien 1975) a textbook on psychopharmacology, it states, "The subjective feeling induced by these drugs (phenothiazines, of which CPZ is the prototype) is not usually pleasant and may lead to mental depression, dysphoria and lassitude."

A ward attendant for two years in Willowbrook's Buildings 13 and 29 agreed with the estimates of the number of residents receiving medication. "There's no way you can argue that at least a third of the residents are receiving drugs daily," he said, and reported commonly observing side effects in the patients, but he defended the practice. "We've got to have some way of keeping them under control. There's too many of them and too few of us. Maybe something could have been done with them years ago, but it's too late now."