

Willowbrook plan stalled

By SYDNEY FRIEDBERG

Willowbrook Developmental Center's plan to use a variety of behavior-control chemicals on some mentally retarded residents is, administrators say, being held in abeyance, following last week's disclosure of the proposal.

Administrators at the institution are indicating that published reports of the drug therapy plan could have the effect of killing the idea.

The proposal, now being redrafted after a watchdog panel rejected an earlier version as ill-advised, will again call for the use of potent chemical substances — including two psychoactive chemicals not sanctioned for the purposes they would be given — on some

mentally retarded children deemed to have behavioral problems.

Disclosures of this recommended course — labeled as "treatment" by Willowbrook and "experimentation" by uninvolved psychiatrists — apparently have resulted in a schism between those who want to pursue the plan at all costs and those who supported it once but now have misgivings.

Parent group opposition has been escalating ever since, as one source put it, "the cat was let out of the bag."

Willowbrook officials have denied that there had been an effort to keep the plan secret from institutionally related parent and advisory groups or from the public eye.

But now, apparently viewing the pub-

lished accounts as detrimental, officials of the state Department of Mental Hygiene in Albany and those at Willowbrook have been hesitant to support or disavow any proposed use of mood drugs as the primary mode of treating abusive or aggressive mentally retarded children.

A spokesman at Willowbrook explained: "We are looking at this as a strictly medical matter for our medical staff to decide."

Dr. Philip Ziring, the state institution's deputy director of medical services, will make a judgment on whether or not to pursue the plan when he returns from vacation a week from Monday, the spokesman added.

According to William Knowlton, a

spokesman for the mental hygiene agency, the proposed drug therapy was "to my knowledge a locally developed plan," which Albany has "never reviewed formally."

"It is in limbo now," Knowlton explained. "Willowbrook has to rework the protocol and draft a formal recommendation which we will rule on."

Barbara Blum, regional director of DMH's retardation division, agreed that the fate of the proposed drug plan is unclear. "There are no simple answers on this issue," she said, on whether to allow or disallow at Willowbrook the use of potentially toxic substances — partic-

(Continued on Page A 2)

(From Page 1)

ularly the chemical lithium carbonate.

She added that she participated in a review of an initial proposal, advanced by Dr. Magda Campbell, a psychiatry professor at New York University School of Medicine, and that while concerned at first, "I was impressed by Dr. Campbell's personal concern and her sensitivity to the fact that experimentation should not take place at Willowbrook."

Lithium, she argued, as well as some of the other drugs under question, may work "where all other methods have failed."

"And if we don't try them, perhaps the residents will stand to lose," Mrs. Blum said.

But Mrs. Blum added she was not certain whether it would be advisable to force the issue.

Other state officials privately stated the drug plan is too controversial to make a fuss about and would probably be a losing cause if they tried.

The Willowbrook Review Panel, most uninvolved psychiatrists, parent groups and the federal Food and Drug Administration argue that the use of lithium as well as the psychoactive chemical haloperidol, marketed as Haldol, are not indicated to curb abusive or aggressive behavior, particularly in children, and such a use must thus be considered experimental.

If Willowbrook decides to pursue the plan, administrators will probably be forced to go to court for a ruling, since the review panel feels strongly that such experimental drug use is disallowed under a 1975 court order.

The administration of psychoactive drugs at institutions like Willowbrook is discouraged because there is a fear that the rights of the residents, incapacitated and vulnerable, will be violated, with contraindicated chemicals given merely to "straitjacket" them.

It is common knowledge that some questionable drugs are used frequently now, but the two new compounds may be even more risky, scientists say, because the effects they have, and the types of symptoms they help, remain unclear.