

PS 69 parents wary of hepatitis carriers despite assurances from medical expert

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG
and MARK LINSALATA

Several of the more than 200 parents who attended an informational meeting last night on the presence of three hepatitis carriers in PS 69 left the assembly without the assurance that their children were safe.

However, two women, who had pulled their children from classes when the attendance of the carriers was revealed, decided to send the pupils back to the New Springville school.

Frank Kelly, principal of PS 69, sent a letter to parents asking them to attend the meeting, which was organized by Roberta Spivelman, president of PS 69's Parent-Teacher Association, to allow parents to discuss hepatitis and carriers of the disease with an expert in the field.

Yesterday two severely retarded children and one with somewhat greater ability were removed from regular special education classes because they had been identified as carriers of a type of hepatitis. The three have been segregated in a classroom with a teacher who volunteered to instruct the pupils despite the possible risk of infection. A new arrangement may be developed Monday, Kelly said.

The exclusion of the pupils, former or current residents of the Willowbrook Developmental Center, from the mainstream of the school has not satisfied many parents or mental health and education officials.

Some parents vehemently asserted last night—despite assurances that the risk to their children was minimal—that the carriers should be removed from the school. Health and education officials feared that the removal of the students or even the current segregation of them would set a dangerous precedent, interfering with the Department of Mental Hygiene's attempt to place the institutionalized retarded in community settings and school systems.

Priscella Weingarden of New Springville took her son out of school earlier this week when she learned that his class, because of the presence of a hepatitis carrier, was eating lunch in the classroom, rather than with the other students. After being assured that the carrier had been removed from her son's class, Mrs. Weingarden said she would return her son to school. She believed his risk was greater under the prior arrangement when he was kept during lunch with the carrier.

A West Brighton resident, the mother of a severely retarded girl, pulled her child out of class a week ago. However, she said that the girl would be returning to school now that she understood the new arrangement.

Dr. Gerald Spielman, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Center and a pediatrician in private practice, told the parents that the three pupils carried molecular particles that have been linked to type B hepatitis, but that they do not have the disease.

"Under certain circumstances they can transmit (type B) hepatitis to other individuals, and what those circumstances are is really the issue," Dr. Spielman said.

The pediatrician said that a blood transfusion would be the surest way to transfer the disease-carrying particles to another person, although a carrier could also transmit the disease through a bite. The particles must enter the bloodstream before a person can contract the disease.

He stressed that type B hepatitis, which attacks the liver and commonly causes headaches, nausea and jaundice, often passes through an individual's system before he becomes aware of it. If sickness occurs, one may be ill for two weeks, after which a full recovery is expected in 96 to 98 per cent of the cases.

In less than 1 per cent of the cases will the disease become very active and result in a chronic infection or death, Dr. Spielman said. He considered the disease less dangerous than measles.

"I as a pediatrician and a parent wonder why this is such an emotional issue when we haven't got 65 per cent of the children in our schools immunized

Page 1
42