

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

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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

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against measles," he said.

Several parents were alarmed, however, when Dr. Spielman explained that there is neither a commercially available vaccine against type B hepatitis or a cure for it. He attempted to allay their fears by pointing to the statistics that indicate the body's ability to fully recover from the illness.

Dr. Spielman told of a recent study of five carriers and about 200 persons the carriers came in contact with. Some changes in liver chemistry were reported, he said, but no one contracted type B hepatitis. He added that about one in 1,000 persons are carriers, and that, statistically at least, possibly 100 teachers and students in the school system were carrying the disease.

He believed that under the proper precautions, which include the thorough washing of hands and eating utensils, the pupils should present almost no risk to other students at PS 69.

However, Dr. Spielman's statistics on the disease and the difficulty of a carrier transmitting it didn't end the fears of one woman who said: "Remote possibility does not mean nonexistence. We parents are not gamblers in the risk of a child's health."

Paula Golbin, a New Springville resident, asked: "Why can't these children be given home instruction or instruction at Willowbrook if that's their home?"

Dr. Spielman said it might be illegal to force that on the students since a federal law passed last January assures equal access to education for the handicapped.

Some considered his answer insufficient and wondered if the law applied to carriers of disease. "If they're sick,"

one woman said, "they should get out."

John Soldini, district representative of the United Federation of Teachers, said the segregation of the three carriers removes the danger from the other children but not the teacher. He asked that the children be "temporarily removed" from school until a policy could be developed that would also protect teachers.

The revelation of the presence of the carriers came to light after a teacher, who had one of the children in a class, came down last May with type A hepatitis. Kelly, the principal, met with the officials of the Board of Education in an attempt to determine the possible danger to other students and teachers. He was informed that the risk was minimal and that the teacher had a type of hepatitis which is not transmitted by type B carriers.

However, a team of city Health Department physicians recommended the segregation of the children after examining them earlier this week.

When asked last night why he did not reveal the presence of the carriers earlier, Kelly replied: "It is not policy to notify parents about something you can do nothing about. At that time, there was nothing you could do to help."

The Community School Board will be asked to investigate the situation at PS 69 and come to a solution within "two or three" days, Joseph Pancila, a member of the board, said.

An estimated 17 other retarded youngsters, including four from Staten Island, have been identified as hepatitis carriers. They will remain in their classes until city health officials review their cases individually, Dr. Helen Fuelner, director of Special Education for the Board of Education, said earlier this week.

The hepatitis type B controversy had been discussed by Department of Mental Hygiene officials and members of the Willowbrook Review Panel, a spokesman for the panel said yesterday.

The spokesman explained it is the panel's position that no hepatitis type B carrier should be excluded from placement in the community on the basis of that medical distinction.

The segregation of the pupils at PS 69 was viewed as a setback by Cora Hoffman, a spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene. She said the state had worked "incredibly hard for years" to get the children in the city school system.

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