

Up Date

Ex-Willowbrook head running nursing home

Dr. Miodrag Ristich, the Yugoslavian-born psychiatrist who ran Willowbrook Developmental Center during two of its stormiest years, says he is happy in the nursing home business, holding an "obviously less taxing job."

Dr. Ristich, 39, is the medical director of the medium-sized Dewitt Nursing Home in Manhattan, where he's worked since last July.

He was Willowbrook's director from July 1972 to June 1974, when he was apparently forced from the high-pressure post by Department of Mental Hygiene officials.

At the time, they apparently disagreed with the emphasis Ristich was placing on having Willowbrook residents transferred to community group homes. Now, of course, that's the state's primary goal.

"Everyone finally seems to agree on the Willowbrook solution," Ristich says. "Willowbrook has to go out of existence because even with the best of efforts and generous funding, there are built-in flaws to that place that the public will not accept."

"It just isn't possible to operate on that location in a physical plant that size," he says.

Ristich adds that the big bone of contention during the years he was a director — a time that parents were suing the state over intolerable conditions at the institution — was whether "you wanted to put the money into Willowbrook or put it into the community."

He always felt the community goal was more important, he says, adding

that "there's no doubt the place has improved somewhat since thousands of residents are out."

There were more than 5,000 retarded residents of Willowbrook when Ristich was director. Now there are 1,700.

As for his own plans, the psychiatrist says: "I don't really have any goals. But surely, if an opportunity comes along that looks like it offers something, either by way of material or non-material reward, I would accept it. But no, I'm not gunning for anything."

Dr. Ristich, who resides with his wife, Yvonne, and two children in Bergen County, N.J., says, however, he does not want to return to Willowbrook.