

Public sees institute during open house



While Dr. Edmund Jenkins, right, a researcher, leads a group into a laboratory of the Institute for Basic Research in Willowbrook, one visitor takes a peek into a microscope.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

The Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation on Forest Hill Rd. in Willowbrook opened its imposing doors to the public yesterday for an open house and walking tours of the research center's facilities.

The multimillion dollar research complex, whose work in the field of mental retardation is known worldwide, has been something of a mystery to many residents of Staten Island, and Dr. Henry Wisniewski, director of the research center, has been trying to change that since he took over in July 1976.

Dr. Wisniewski said yesterday that the open houses may become a regular program at the research center, where more than 200 doctors and laboratory workers are busy each day trying to learn more about the many forms of mental retardation. Dr. Wisniewski is also attempting to expand the institute's valuable services out into the community, with outpatient referral services, inpatient treatment programs for the mentally retarded, a seizure disorder clinic and full-scale diagnostic testing services.

Meanwhile, members of the institute's research staff are slowly making progress against the insidious forms of human brain disorders. Recently, members of the institute's genetics department were able to identify three new disorders never before discovered, after doing research work on amino acids. Two of the findings have already been reported in medical journals.

Members of the human development and nutrition department are also making inroads in the study of the relation between the malfunction of the developing brain and the nutrition provided to the newborn infant. Researchers at the institute have catalogued possible problems with the typical cow's milk baby formulas sold on the market and are pushing the various pharmaceutical companies to provide formulas that are more similar to human milk. The nation's largest manufacturer of baby formulas, Similac, has already been in contact institute on possible changes.

The institute's Department of Human Development was the first to develop a diagnostic test for prenatal homocystinuria, an amino acid metabolism test. In one instance, Dr. Lynn Fleischer, a researcher, was able to detect the development of a normal fetus in a woman who had previously given birth to two retarded children. The mother had intended to have the third child aborted until the test results were reported to her.

Dr. Wisniewski and his research staff concede that while there is presently no cure for mental retardation, their sophisticated research work and advances in scientific equipment and technology have increased their knowledge of many brain disorders 10-fold in the last few years.

—JOHN E. HURLEY