

Retardation center points to progress; Stein, to cost

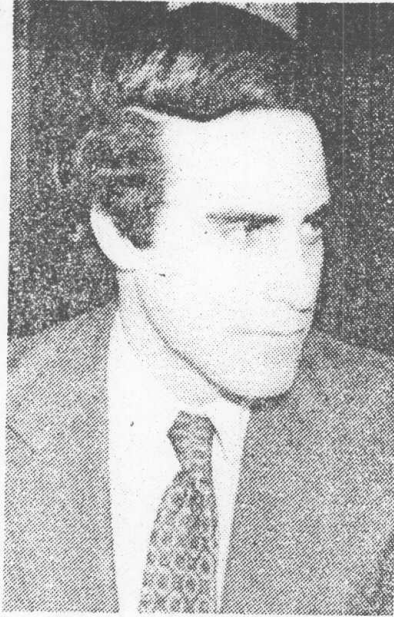
By BRUCE ALPERT

Since New York Medical College's Mental Retardation Institute began caring for 157 former Staten Island Developmental Center residents two months ago, seven patients have learned to feed themselves and one can now utter a few words, college officials say.

But Manhattan Borough President Andrew Stein said yesterday that kind of progress does not justify the \$89,000 a year for each patient the state has allocated for the MRI program in East Harlem's Flower & Fifth Ave. Hospital.

He also charged that MRI is not equipped to care for the residents, who the state concedes have been neglected since they were transferred to the Gouverneur unit of Manhattan Developmental Center 14 years ago from the then Willowbrook State School.

Dr. Margaret Giannini, executive



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director of the institute, confronted Stein yesterday inside the hospital, where the borough president had scheduled a news conference to call on the state to reduce the facility's Medicaid rate to a figure comparable with other state facilities for the retarded. Such public institutions operate at about a third of the cost.

Saying that teaching the profoundly retarded and multihandicapped residents how to feed themselves is just one example of what the MRI program can accomplish, Dr. Giannini told Stein that it is wrong to scrutinize the program "on a cost containment basis alone."

"These clients have been neglected for years," Dr. Giannini said, pointing out dozens of residents who were incapable of mustering enough strength to sit up in their hospital beds.

"They didn't have to end up this way if they had received adequate care," she added, "and now I think we have a responsibility to do all we can to enable them to reach at least a portion of their potential as human beings."

Stein was unimpressed. At \$89,000 a patient a year the borough president said the MRI program was among the most expensive in the world for the care of the retarded.

The high Medicaid rates were first disclosed in the Advance six months ago.

"As one of the earliest activists supporting humane care for the most dependent members of our society," Stein said, "I had hoped that exposure of the Willowbrook abuses would result in a better deal for the retarded. At a time of major fiscal restraints, however, I believe that the people of New York cannot afford this major expenditure of funds."

In a written statement handed to reporters, Stein also charged that the patients are being treated by a staff "who were not initially trained to deal with their special problems, including lack of speech, incontinence and the inability of the patients to feed themselves."

Dr. Giannini said that because of the special nature of services being provided the MRI patients, there was no available pool of personnel from which to draw. As a result, she conceded, the staff, drawn mostly from the staff of Flower & Fifth Ave.'s acute care hospital, did not receive as much prior training as "we would have liked."

But she said that a training program had been initiated to upgrade the skills of all MRI employees.

Jennifer L. Howse, associate commis-

Hospital to close

Flower & Fifth Ave. Hospital will close as an acute-care facility within the next two months, Executive Director John Keane said yesterday.

The 104-year-old hospital, taken over in January by the Archdiocese of New York, has been operating in the red for years, Keane said.

Efforts will be made to find hospital employees positions with other medical facilities throughout the city as well as with the Mental Retardation Institute, which is running an inpatient program for 153 former Staten Island Developmental Center residents in the East Harlem hospital, Keane said.

Patients in need of continued acute-care will be transferred to other hospitals, the executive director said. Only 71 patients remain in the 400-bed hospital.

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sioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and developmental Disabilities and the former executive director of the Willowbrook Review Panel, said despite a lack of pretraining for the new MRI employees, it was imperative to move the patients from Gouverneur because of the "horrendous conditions there."

"I could not have seen any further delay in starting the program," said Dr. Howse, who oversees six state mental retardation facilities in the New York City-Long Island area. "The fire escapes were rusting off the buildings and the wiring was archaic."

Both Dr. Howse and Mental Retarda-

tion Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin said that four recent deaths of residents at Flower & Fifth Ave. Hospital did not warrant, as Stein had charged, serious questions about the level of care at MRI.

The state conducted a full investigation, Coughlin said, and found no indication of patient neglect. Rather, he said, the deaths were indictative of the serious nature of the residents' conditions.

Coughlin also blasted Stein for saying that some of the MRI patients are so profoundly retarded that they probably will never be able to return to the community as fully functioning human beings.

"I won't play God," Coughlin said in an interview from his Albany office. "I'm not prepared as Borough President Stein may be to write someone off."

Coughlin also said that a state Health Department review was under way to determine if the Medicaid rate of \$245 a day a patient is justified. If MRI is not providing an appropriate level of services for that rate, Coughlin said funding will be lowered accordingly.

But Stein said that the rate was "unconscionable" and should never have been awarded in the first placed.

Stein was asked if he concurred with a union official who charged the high rate was merely a political move by Gov. Carey to win support from the Archdiocese of New York, which now runs the financially troubled college and institute Stein blinked and said, "Could be."