

Our opinion

Doesn't anyone really care about retarded anymore?

It was only a few years ago that state officials were engaged in something of a contest to see who could emerge as the greatest champion of the rights of the mentally retarded.

Gov. Carey, after signing the Willowbrook Consent Decree in 1975, ordered bold steps to improve the care provided to the mentally disabled and to guarantee that the horrors associated with the former Willowbrook State School could never happen again.

The state Legislature, following the governor's lead, broke up the sprawling and insensitive bureaucracy that had been the Department of Mental Hygiene. It created new agencies, and new monitoring mechanisms, to ensure that retarded citizens were treated with respect and were helped to realize their full potential as individuals.

But that was in 1975 and 1976.

Now it's 1981, and no one seems to give a damn.

It was just three weeks ago that the Advance published the first in a series of articles raising significant questions about the United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) Associations of New York State, an organization entrusted with the care of nearly 1,000 mentally retarded persons under provisions of the Willowbrook Consent Decree.

The articles raised questions not only about the level of care afforded patients by UCP but also about the organization's use of patient and public funds. The series raised a larger question, too: Can the state adequately monitor the hundreds of organizations — of which UCP is the largest — charged with caring for the mentally retarded in both institutional and community settings?

A few years ago, questions of that sort would have provoked an immediate response from the executive and legislative branches of state government.

But this time around they've elicited hardly a word of concern, much less an outpouring of indignation.

Can it be that no official's anger is aroused by the fact that UCP sometimes seems to put its own convenience above the needs of its patients?

Can it be that no official is alarmed at the fact that a patient died during elective surgery authorized by a UCP official in apparent violation of legal requirements?

Can it be that no official is concerned that the patient's death was not reported to the state, as required by law?