

## 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?

Can it be that no official wonders about UCP's practice of forcing patients to buy clothing, shoes and other personal items from a UCP store that charges far in excess of retail prices?

Can it be that no official is outraged that UCP, during one three-year period, overcharged the state and federal governments by nearly \$7 million for patient care?

Can it be that the state is backsliding, slowly but surely, to the point where the mentally retarded were forgotten citizens?

The answer to all of those questions, we're sorry to say, appears to be "yes."

The governor seems to have washed his hands entirely of the problems of the mentally retarded, preferring to rest on his laurels even though they've obviously wilted with age.

Legislative committees, which have been acquainted with the questions raised by the Advance series, seem to think there's nothing they can do. They seem to believe that a financial audit of UCP, now being conducted at the request of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, will provide adequate answers to all of the questions that have been raised.

That attitude is truly unfortunate, for it indicates that, so far as public officials are concerned, care for the mentally retarded has been reduced to a matter of dollars and cents. Gone is the sense of humanity, and of decency, that dominated discussion of care for the retarded only a few years ago.

There is more than money at stake. The real issue that needs to be placed on the public agenda is whether the state — having surrendered responsibility for the care of thousands of mentally retarded individuals to private organizations — is able to guarantee that those individuals are receiving the sort of care to which they're entitled.

That no one seems willing to address that issue head-on is to suggest that all of the concern expressed by public officials a few years ago was nothing more than a shallow political response to an issue that happened to be making headlines at the time.

If that's not the case, responsible public officials must take immediate steps — including legislative hearings and intensified audits of both services and finances — to determine whether the retarded are in fact receiving the sort of care everyone has agreed they're entitled to.