

Dr. Harold Berman, 82, 1st Willowbrook director

Dr. Harold M. Berman, 82, the first director of the former Willowbrook State School, died yesterday in Laguna Hills Hospital, Calif., after he suffered a stroke.

Born in Boston; Mass., Dr. Berman received his bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1921, and his medical degree from Tufts University in 1925.

After completing an internship at Pawtucket Memorial Hospital, Pawtucket, R.I., Dr. Berman began a career in psychiatry at St. Lawrence Hospital, Ogdensburg, N.Y. He rose from department supervisor to assistant director of the facility.

He came to Staten Island in 1949, to assume the directorship of the newly created Willowbrook State School.

When Dr. Berman arrived the facility was being converted from Halloran Veterans Hospital, where soldiers from World War II were treated, into a facility for the mentally retarded.

Dr. Berman supervised the transition and began a massive training and recruitment drive for qualified staff, and secured additional state funds for the facility.

During his tenure, from 1949 through 1964, Willowbrook State School, now called the Staten Island Developmental Center, grew to a complex of 51 buildings housing 6,300 mentally retarded adults and children.



Dr. Harold H. Berman
... in 1963 photo

In 1953, Dr. Berman authorized hepatitis experiments on Willowbrook residents between the ages of 5 and 10 in an effort to combat the high rate of hepatitis infections in the institution.

It had been found that uninfected patients, when injected with gamma globulin, were protected against hepatitis viruses for as long as nine months.

Dr. Berman said the experiments resulted in Willowbrook residents having more immunity to the disease than residents of any other institution in the nation.

In 1976, a Wagner College professor called the experiments immoral, saying the inoculations were dangerous and equivalent to "assault and battery on people."

The experiments had been halted in 1973 by a federal district court order.

But in November 1976, Dr. Berman wrote a lengthy article in the Advance, defending the experiments.

He likened the practice at the institution to vaccinating children against smallpox or measles.

"If we accepted the professor's reasoning, that no assault should be made on sickness, then what are we doctors working for?" he said.

The experiments, done with consent of parents and guardians, were directed by a professor of pediatrics at New York University College of Medicine and a professor of biochemistry at Cornell University.

In the article, Dr. Berman also denounced the concept of Willowbrook as a school, saying it should have been designated Willowbrook State Hospital. It had been a hospital, developing treatment for "mental deficiency," under his direction, he said.

In 1963, he was honored by the Richmond Masonic Luncheon Club. He received the Honor Award of the National Committee for the furtherance of Jewish Education in 1957. He was also cited by the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children in 1952 and by New York State for 25 years of service in 1952.

Dr. Berman was a member of the American Psychiatric Association, American Association on Mental Deficiency, a diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and the Richmond County Medical Society.

He served as a consulting psychiatrist to the Veterans Administration in Sunnount, N.Y. and as an associate clinical professor at New York University and Bellevue Medical Center. He also was a founder of Doctors' Hospital.

He was a member of the Elks Club and a past exalted ruler of the Ogdensburg, N.Y. Lodge of Masons.

He served as a commander in the Navy Medical Corps during World War II.

After retiring from his post at Willowbrook, Dr. Berman established a private psychiatric practice in Port Richmond. He resided in Silver Lake until he moved to Laguna Hills in 1979.

Surviving are his wife, Catherine; a son, Bernard; two daughters, Luci Berkowitz and Carol Mitchell, and two grandchildren.

A funeral service will be conducted by the Rabbi Phillip Goldberg, chaplain at the Staten Island Developmental Center, at Menorah Chapel, New Springville, at 11 a.m. tomorrow. Burial will be in United Hebrew Cemetery, Richmond.