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Further investigation of rape case needed

A state investigator has concluded that he cannot find the man who raped a severely retarded patient at the Staten Island Developmental Center last May. The question, however, remains: Why wasn't the woman's pregnancy discovered until seven months after the attack?

It is possible, as some suggest, that there was no negligence involved. Administrators say the woman had an irregular menstrual cycle and a distended belly. Others suggest that because of her disabilities pregnancy would be one of the last things a doctor would suspect.

Still, it is not unreasonable to question the woman's medical care. Certainly a competent doctor, nurse or health aide, caring for the woman day after day, might have had some inkling of the woman's condition after seven months.

To his credit, Center Director James Walsh has been candid about the problem, and has called for a new investigation into the question.

Describing the seven-month lapse as "difficult to comprehend," Mr. Walsh has asked a state medical team to determine if the lapse in detecting the pregnancy was caused by the woman's condition or lax medical care.

As Mr. Walsh himself concedes, something must have been drastically wrong with the staff supervision that day in May when the patient was raped. The director and his staff should take strong measures to assure that this kind of incident can never happen again.

Beyond that, the developmental center also has a clear duty to find out why it took the staff seven months to detect a pregnancy in a severely retarded woman. It may well be an isolated case, as some claim. It may also be symptomatic of a deeper problem in staffing, training or supervision.

Either way, the center and the state have an obligation to investigate this matter further. Human lives depend on it.