



## An Interdisciplinary Approach to Children with Chronic Handicaps; A Pediatrician's View

Angie Connor

### ***The Condition***

As acute infectious diseases of children have come under control, health personnel have turned their attention to children with chronic handicaps. These conditions often involve elements of incurability, long-term expensive care, and psychosocial problems. Two out of three of these children are likely to be multiply handicapped, their care requiring not only several physician specialists, but therapists, audiologists, psychologists, and social workers. Each member of the health team has a position of equal status so that the contribution of each in the physical, intellectual, and emotional problems of the child can be considered, weighed, and integrated into the treatment plans.

### ***Care***

Health care for the increasing numbers of children with long-term disabilities is hampered by the scarcity of trained professional personnel, and the aggregation of services available in the large urban centers. Care

has become increasingly more complex and costly, and the distribution of health services to the children of less affluent families requires reaching out to them and providing care which will be attractive and accessible to them.

### ***The Health Team Approach***

The health team has developed a defect-oriented approach; the diagnostic label of the disability, rather than the functional status of the child has been the compelling organizational feature. However, the high incidence of related disorders in a single child indicated that cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and epilepsy, for example, lend themselves to the same type of therapeutic management.

As the health team has struggled to develop a multi-disciplinary approach focused on helping handicapped children, important gaps in services have gradually been recognized. The majority of children with chronic disabilities have learning, educational and vocational problems

not within the competence of the health professions. The educator is the professional person with the closest, most continuous, and longest association with the children. This association promises to be extended as the preschool exceptional child is placed in an educational setting. After or during treatment it is the educator who assumes a primary responsibility for the developing child. Ways to involve the teachers from the earliest planning of management are being explored. The problems posed are formidable, and run the whole gamut of administrative hierarchies, communication difficulties, release of the teacher from classroom duties, and the time involved in continuous re-assessment of progress and objectives in management plans, to mention a few.

### ***The Educational Approach***

The educators, too, have pursued a defect-oriented educational system. Children are assigned to classes on

*continued on page 22*