The Willowbrook State School was an institution for the retarded on Staten Island, New York. During the 1950s, Dr. Saul Krugman was the director of research at Willowbrook. He knew that many children there would develop hepatitis because of overcrowding and other unsanitary conditions. In fact, many members of the staff developed hepatitis as well. Dr. Krugman also knew that the virus responsible for hepatitis did not have hosts outside human beings. He was persuaded that these conditions justified research on the disease in humans. He initiated a project at Willowbrook to study gamma globulin injections to determine whether they would protect the children from infection. The injections did seem to have a strong protective effect.

Dr. Krugman then admitted new residents of the school to special quarters and fed them virus samples he had collected from the other children. By tracking virus exposures and the pattern of symptoms that followed, he was led to the conclusion that hepatitis had two strains, A and B. A had shorter incubation and was highly communicable, whereas B had longer incubation and was less communicable.

When protest arose regarding his exposure of these children to hepatitis virus, Dr. Krugman defended his work. If he had not infected the children as part of research, they would have developed hepatitis anyway because of their school’s communal housing. This research, he said, was akin to an experiment in nature, and no level of improved hygiene would have protected the children. He noted, too, that he had been given permission from parents to experiment on their children.

It is true that children were enrolled with parental consent. A letter explaining the research was sent to parents whose children were on a waiting list for admission to Willowbrook. Immediate admission was the reward for parents who signed the letter; parents who did not provide consent were not assured of immediate admission. The letter is reproduced below.

Willowbrook State School  
Office of the Director  
Staten Island, New York  

November 15, 1958  

Dear________________:  

We are studying the possibility of preventing epidemics of hepatitis on a new principle. Virus is introduced and gamma globulin given later to some, so that either no attack or only a mild attack of hepatitis is expected to follow. This may give the children immunity
against this disease for life. We should like to give your child this new form of prevention with the hope that it will afford protection.

Permission form is enclosed for your consideration. If you wish to have your child given the benefit of this new preventative, will you so signify by signing the form.

Sincerely,

H. H. Berman, MD

Director

Discussion Questions:

1. The hepatitis studies that took place at Willowbrook is considered invaluable. In fact, these studies established for the first time that two strains of hepatitis existed. Although the value of the studies has never been in question, their methods remain under continuing debate. They involved, for example, feeding live hepatitis virus to retarded children and the recruitment methods have also been a matter of controversy. What other issues does this study raise for the use of human research subjects?

2. How did researchers justify exposing children at Willowbrook to hepatitis infection? How persuasive is their argument?

3. Does the letter adequately express the nature, risks, and benefits of the study? Might aspects of agreeing to the experiment be viewed as coercive?

4. Even if the risks of this study were adequately disclosed, do you think researchers would have been justified in exposing children to hepatitis infection?