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Scientists and the child-molesting study

It is ironic that the Church of Scientology has stepped forward to object to the spending of \$832,000 by the Florida Mental Health Institute (FMHI) in Tampa to study child molesters.

A Scientology-sponsored group — the Citizens Commission on Human Rights — says that child molesters are criminals, not sick people. Representatives of the commission's Clearwater chapter said the pedophiles should be placed behind high walls where they can no longer rape or molest children.

Well, the commission may have a point. With the FMHI's study not yet under way (it will begin next month), a great many questions are waiting to be answered. Some authorities in sexual pathology feel that a pedophile's obsession with small children is virtually untreatable, and that neither therapy nor prison sentences will prevent a molester from returning repeatedly to his old ways.

One of the risks the FMHI will be taking with its new study is that the research itself may make the sexual offenders somehow appear more respectable and less dangerous to society than they actually are. The institute's outpatient center will carry out the three-year program, whose main goal is to try to prevent

relapses in the sex offenders. A center spokesman has emphasized that none of the patients will be sent to the center as an alternative to court-mandated punishment.

It will be risky research. The FMHI will try to find out why some pedophiles relapse and others do not. But if an FMHI patient does relapse and commits an indictable offense, the institute may be blamed (fairly or unfairly) for being involved with the offender.

Getting back to the Scientologists: They have as much right as anyone to comment on the proposed research. But Scientology's own track record with psychological research has many blots. Many disaffected ex-Scientologists have accused the cult of brainwashing and coercion.

And when it comes to accusing people of being criminals, Scientology has little room to holler. Several high-ranking Scientologists were convicted on federal charges a few years ago. Internationally, Scientology's standing with a number of foreign governments has left a lot to be desired.

Our point is simply this: Whatever flaws the proposed FMHI research program may have, the Scientologists are not the ones to raise a hue and cry about it.