Welsh Office to review consultant's lengthy suspension

Roger Dobson, *Abergavenny*

The Welsh Office is to carry out an investigation into the four year suspension of consultant pathologist Bernard Charnley.

Dr Charnley, who was Britain's longest suspended consultant, and North Glamorgan NHS Trust have reached agreement, and as a result "disciplinary processes" arising from allegations surrounding smear tests that were made against him are being discontinued. The trust said that the agreement was made on the basis that Dr Charnley will not return to the trust and that he will have an 18 month secondment to the University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff.

The costs of the affair, which began in 1994, are estimated to be more than £500 000 (\$800 000). In the wake of the settlement, the Welsh health minister, Jon Owen Jones, has warned that disciplinary proceedings against consultants should be completed fairly, quickly, and at a reasonable cost. "The disciplinary procedure has

clearly proved to be inadequate in this case," he said. "While I am relieved that this long overdue process has reached a conclusion, I remain very concerned that health service resources have been used to so little effect and for such a long period. We must ensure that the procedure protects the public, is fair to

those involved, and can be completed quickly and at reasonable cost. I have previously expressed my concern at the length of time taken to resolve this case and have committed the Welsh Office to conduct an investigation."

A Welsh Office spokesman said that details of the investigation were being worked out. In a brief statement North Glamorgan NHS Trust said: "Both parties believe the agreement avoids any further extensions of the dispute between them and is in the interests of Dr Charnley, the trust, and the NHS." □

Dr Bernard Charnley: his four year suspension will be reviewed

New president of the German Medical Council may back reform

Deirdre Tilmann Mahkorn,
Bergisch Gladbach

The president of the German Medical Council, Karsten Vilmar, aged 69, announced his resignation last week at the organisation's annual meeting, after 21 years in office. He will be succeeded by Jörg-Dietrich Hoppe, a member of the Christian Democrat party, who is expected to be more cooperative about the controversial health system reforms being proposed by the minister of health, Green Party member Andrea Fischer.

Throughout the meeting, representatives of doctors' organisations criticised the government's health reforms, which are planned to be implemented next year. The main aim is to reduce spending within the

healthcare system. Mrs Fischer hopes to cover health spending with the money paid into health insurance companies by individual citizens. This sum amounts to DM250bn (£86bn; \$138bn) yearly. She has made it clear that the government is not prepared to cover additional costs and is being backed by the German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder.

The most controversial points in the health reforms include the introduction of a so-called "positive list," which is to include the names of all drugs to be covered by health insurance companies. Currently, more than 60 000 products are available on the market. However, many of these are homoeopathic or herbal remedies that are of no proved value. Doctors consider that politicians should not interfere in individual medical decisions.

Mrs Fischer is particularly keen to introduce a general practice based care system for most patients. In an effort to reduce the numbers of patients who see a specialist without first seeing a GP, bonus points will be

awarded to those who attend their GP first. Medical organisations are concerned that this limits patients' choice.

The government has proposed that health insurance companies become more involved in investing in hospitals. Doctors organisations consider that this may shift attention to economic issues rather than the provision of optimal patient care. Another key debating point is that of the proposed "glass patient"—in which data about patients and their medical history are to be made accessible to all health insurance companies. Many believe that this will undermine patient data confidentiality.

Practice based specialists, who are relatively common in Germany, are worried about the proposed introduction of more hospital managed, outpatient care for chronically ill patients performed in hospitals.

In his farewell speech, Karsten Vilmar encouraged doctors to remain persistent in their opposition to the introduction of the health reforms. □

UK consultants warn of overwork and general demoralisation

Linda Beecham, *BMJ*

Representatives of the United Kingdom's 23 000 senior hospital doctors say that they are demoralised and disillusioned by an increasing workload.

At the BMA's senior medical staffs conference last week they expressed their concern that the implementation of the working time directive, clinical governance, peer review, and continuing professional development will decrease clinical time and increase stress.

Despite the fact that a survey commissioned by the doctors' pay review body showed that 20% of consultants worked more than 60 hours a week for the NHS and that the increased intensity of work was greater for consultants than for any other professional group, the government refused to implement an additional £50 (\$80m) a year which the review body recommended (6 February, p 347).

The results of a random survey of a sample of consultants were reported to the conference. These showed that up to half of all surgeons and anaesthetists would be willing to withdraw from waiting list initiative work if the government refuses to recognise and reward their increasing workload. The conference called for the initiative to be dropped because it does not usually help those in most clinical need, distorts clinical priorities, and diverts NHS funds to the detriment of acute medical care.

A consultant surgeon in Northern Ireland, Kanwar Panesar, said stress had become part of a consultant's life. In a study of doctors in the province, with a 75% response rate, more than 60% said that increased work, lack of resources and supporting staff, and increased management responsibilities all added to their feelings of stress.

The chairman of the BMA's consultants committee, Peter Hawker, said: "The intensity of consultants' workload is unsustainable." □