Blair throws down challenge to GPs over NHS changes

Linda Beecham *BMJ*

The UK prime minister, Tony Blair, has promised doctors increased resources for the NHS if GPs are prepared to accept change. "If we don't modernise, the agenda will move to those who don't want to rebuild the NHS at all," he warned at a recent conference of the BMA's General Practitioners Committee (GPC).

Mr Blair was speaking during a live video link to GPC Conference 2000 in Harrogate. He said that primary care was pivotal to the health service. "We want GPs to be the innovators and drivers for change." There had to be better access and more services offered in primary care.

The prime minister answered questions from a panel of four GPs, who all told him of the problems of general practice. They said that they faced rising drug budgets, an inability to get their patients into hospital, and an increased workload.

"I work 70 hours a week," Dr Helen Groom, a GP in Gateshead, told him. "You expect us to take on more and more with fewer and fewer people. You cannot expect us to be open 24

hours a day and still stay sane."

Mr Blair admitted that the NHS was facing "very severe problems." But he asked GPs to work with the government to make sure the necessary changes happen. "My fear is that if we don't make these changes people will become increasingly demoralised about when the NHS will get back on its feet," he said.

Neither the prime minister nor the health secretary, Alan Milburn, who addressed the meeting in person afterwards, could understand how GPs could complain of increased workload and yet not embrace NHS Direct—the nurse led telephone advice line—and walk-in centres.

"There is nothing wrong," Mr Blair said, "in trying to deliver different methods of health care." He said that there did not have to be "one gateway into the health service" and that NHS Direct was complementary to general practice and not a threat to it.

Mr Blair's message was reinforced by Mr Milburn. He urged GPs to end what he called the phoney war between traditional

Tony Blair urged GPs to be "innovators for change"

surgeries and walk-in centres and NHS Direct—they complemented each other.

"I want nothing less than [a] reinvention of the NHS—what it does, the way it runs, and how it

is organised," said Mr Milburn. He said that his vision was for a single care system—health and social services—shaped around the particular needs of the individual patient. □

EU advisers to declare their interests

Rory Watson *Brussels*

The European Commission has started to implement a new policy of openness by making available to the public any declarations of interest of members of the influential independent committees, which provide the commission with scientific advice.

The move follows a lengthy campaign by the British pressure group Baby Milk Action with support from UK Labour members of the European parliament and was immediately welcomed by the organisation's policy director, Patti Rundall.

"This decision is extremely important, and we warmly wel-

come it," she said. She continued: "For consumers to have confidence in government decisions it is vital that policymakers have access to truly independent advice and that any commercial influences are out in the open. For too long, we have been asked to take on trust the independence of the commission's committee members."

The commission has always insisted that the members of its various scientific committees act independently, make annual declarations of interest, and declare specific interests at each meeting. But until now, that information has not been made public.

Now details of the 19 members of the Scientific Committee for Food are to be diffused more widely, possibly by being made available on the internet. □

Full story in News Extra at www.bmj.com

UK junior doctors to vote on pay offer

Linda Beecham *BMJ*

The 29 000 UK junior hospital doctors who are members of the BMA will decide in a referendum whether to accept a revised pay offer from the health departments.

Last week the Junior Doctors Committee (JDC), which represents all 37 000 junior doctors, decided that there was "sufficient merit" in the offer to proceed with a referendum. Before this there will be a special conference on 15 April.

Local and regional meetings will be held to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the new proposals, which are due to be introduced on 1

December, and information will be sent to all junior doctors.

Negotiations have been going on for months to improve the pay of junior doctors, particularly their out of hours pay. They currently receive a fraction of their normal pay for each hour worked over 40 hours a week. This can be as little as £4.02 an hour.

Last December the JDC rejected the previous proposals and called for a ballot on industrial action if the offer was not improved (1 January, p 62).

Under the new proposals, the current pay system would be replaced with a banding framework, which reflects the amount and timing of out of hours work, as well as its intensity and anti-social nature. Criteria have been negotiated to determine which band the doctor goes into. □

Full story in News Extra at www.bmj.com