LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

"Keeping tabs on the doctors"

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"Keeping tabs on the doctors" is the name of the game for some MPs in the dying days of a parliament that has too little to do. There is always good sport to be had at the profession's expense, especially as a shrinking public sector leaves the Westminster hounds with nowhere else to run.

At the moment they are in full cry in pursuit of doctors who do not seem to measure up to the uncertain standards of the National Health Service. For some the chase was made worth while last week when they heard that there was to be an overhaul of the disciplinary process in hospitals. Mr Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, is initiating a review of the disciplinary procedures for hospital doctors and dentists, to be carried out by a joint working party drawn from the profession and the health departments. The terms of reference will be to consider current procedures and recommend what improvement is possible.

This titbit, in advance of the official announcement, was thrown to the pack who make up the Commons select committee on the health service ombudsman in order to keep them at bay after a particularly savage session last week with the men from the ministry. It must count as a kill for the MPs in the face of evasive tactics by Department of Health officials, who rank with the doctors as fair game.

There should by now be no illusions on either side about the real objective of the MPs' hunt or, if you like, witch hunt. It stems from a conviction among MPs that they have a public duty to get behind the barriers that they believe the medical profession erects for its own protection and to the possible detriment of patients.

Mr Fowler's review of disciplinary procedures is not necessarily a concession to that point of view and has more to do with reducing the length of time that disciplinary cases take. But given the scent, MPs were off and running with an immediate bid for the patients' interests to be represented on the working party.

There is nevertheless the risk of a conflict between medical staff who feel under a restraint of too much discipline and the MP watchdogs who are convinced that there is too little. This arises partly because complaints often cannot be investigated as doctors move about so much. In the absence of instant "discipline" the committee has taken to summoning before it consultants who have been found at fault by the ombudsman. A second such inquisition in three months is down for 24 March.

Meanwhile, the MPs have revived their call for a national register of doctors and nurses to serve as a disciplinary record which would follow them around. This battle of the blacklist has suddenly become an issue of some contention. The DHSS is flatly against the idea. The objections are that it would be costly, raise problems about consistent grounds for discipline, and be difficult to keep up to date and reliable.

But when these points were listed last week by Mr Len Peach, chief executive of the NHS, he had his knuckles sharply rapped. If the army could keep such records so could the NHS and it had better get on with it, he was told, with a warning that if the

committee was not satisfied it would haul the minister before it.

The committee's view was robustly stated by one of its more hawkish members, Mr James Pawsey, a Conservative MP, who said: "We have had too many cases from the ombudsman where doctors have not performed as well as we believe they should have done, but they suddenly disappear and nobody knows where they have gone. They go to another part of the NHS where they may continue with the same malpractice. . . . We have to keep tabs on the doctors."

Elsewhere, another MP, Labour's Mr Nigel Spearing, was given leave to bring in a 10 minute rule bill to widen the discretion of the General Medical Council in defining professional misconduct. "The profession needs protection, as do the public, from that tiny proportion of doctors whose conduct has proved to be unacceptable," said Mr Spearing. It is the third time that his bill has surfaced, and it will go down a third time, too. But it is all part of keeping tabs on the doctors.

Let it not be assumed, however, that the profession's case is allowed to go by default as parliament focuses on the misdemeanours of a few. There was no inclination to challenge Mr Peach when amid all the flak he stated: "Very many consultants give us much more than we pay them for."

AIDS staff on the brink of "burn out"

Likewise, four clinicians appearing as witnesses before another select committee last week gave a good account not only of themselves but also of what was actually going on in the wards, with staff on the brink of "burn out."

To quote: "We have a large number of highly experienced people who have been pushed to the limit for too long and they cannot sustain that level of output much longer. There are significant amounts of psychological, domestic, and professional distress. I very much fear for the physical and psychological health of many of my colleagues who have been pushed too far for too long."

Such was the testimony of Dr David Miller of the Middlesex Hospital Medical School, who with his colleagues, Professor Michael Adler, Dr Tony Pinching (St Mary's), and Dr Charles Farthing (St Stephen's), gave evidence on the problems of the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) in what proved to be a brisk session of the social services committee. Dr Miller's account of the personal toll on staff trying to manage a frightening new disease was wholly related to the context of a continual cash shortage and insufficient resources. Plainly a case can be made out for keeping tabs on the politicians.

Especially so after a piece of dubious parliamentary practice that occurred two Fridays back. On that day the Commons allowed to pass unopposed through all its stages the Licensing (Restaurant Meals) Bill, a private member's measure, which went on to receive the royal assent (7 March, p 651).

The deputy speaker, to his credit, did remark that the speaker disapproved of the House taking the committee stage of a bill without notice, though he had no power to prevent it. In allowing the unusual procedure to go unchallenged the government connived at a piece of legislative sharp practice. But we already know that, above all, we need to keep tabs on governments.