LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Health divide at the polls

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The truth is an early casualty in every general election campaign, and it is not one that the health service can do much about—being itself one of the worst victims of political overkill. The reason is not hard to find. According to the Gallup poll, the health service ranks second only to unemployment as the most important issue of the 1987 election.

Compared with 1983, and especially since 1979, the National Health Service has displaced inflation and strikes as the issue that people tell pollsters will be most important in deciding their vote. And when they were asked which party had the best policies to deal with the problems of the health service 41% said Labour and 24% Conservative. That difference in perception in Labour's favour is twice as large as it was in 1983.

It was no surprise, therefore, that Labour should focus attention on an issue judged so important by the voters and on which it was held to have the best policies. The surprising aspect is the uninspired way in which the subject is treated in the Labour manifesto. Far from driving home its advantage on a potentially election winning issue with radical and coherent proposals, Labour's section on the health service is the thinnest of the three main party manifestos.

In the second week of the campaign Labour did produce a supplementary manifesto, *Restoring the National Health*, which adds a few details. Thus Labour would have a "bed manager" in every district to allocate hospital beds. It would monitor the performance of consultants to maximise their NHS workload. Patients would have a guaranteed right to a second medical opinion. A "fairer system" would be introduced to decide NHS pay. And there would be more provision for alternative medicine on the NHS.

Yet even in this second attempt the same element is missing as in the first. Quite simply, the omission is the £ symbol. Nowhere does it intrude to show even roughly how much more a Labour government would spend beyond the £21 billion presently committed to the NHS. No more elucidation was forthcoming when questions were put directly to Labour's health spokesman, Michael Meacher.

He insisted that Labour would spend more on the health service than the Conservatives and the Alliance (which pledges £1 billion more in five years). But instead of a figure Mr Meacher goes for a formula. This is to increase NHS spending by 3% a year in real terms. Mr Meacher also has a rather more ambitious target, which is to raise the proportion of the gross domestic product spent on health from Britain's 5.5% to nearer the 8% or 9% in France and Germany. On present calculations that might amount to an extra £10 billion a year, so Labour is quick to add that the difference can be made up only gradually.

Examined on Labour's proposals to abolish prescription charges and phase out NHS pay beds, Mr Meacher could not be precise on timing, even within five years. He said: "We will increase resources in health approximately in line with economic growth and within that we can make a significant reduction in prescription charges."

At the final reckoning Labour may regret that its disappointingly superficial policies on health do not withstand rigorous examination in terms of costs and resources. For what it is worth, the Conservatives obliged when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel

Lawson, estimated a loss of revenue of £630m on charges and a cost of £400m a year on extra resources.

The debate, so far, has been almost entirely on the government's record, with predictable contributions from both sides. So we have Mr Meacher proclaiming: "The health service is on a remorseless treadmill of decline, and will not survive a third Thatcher term." While declaring that Labour is committed to a "real boost in health spending and services," the aim is to highlight existing deficiencies to the point of exaggeration and distortion.

All's fair in war and elections, perhaps, but there is a danger that ill founded criticism and denigration of the health service, whether by politicians or professionals, can not only affect morale within the NHS but cause distress to patients and their relatives. The government for its part is content to stand by its record, which it confidently projects also in a supplement to its manifesto, under the title *Health into the Nineties*.

Restoring the balance

Amid the political sound and fury the voice of medicine has managed to come through reassuringly and restore some balance. A good example was a discussion on BBC Radio 4. Professor Alan Maynard, head of health economics at York University, doubtless helped bewildered voters when he said: "Demand is far greater than the supply and it always will be. Regardless of how we increase resources we are going to have to make very harsh rationing decisions, which are unlikely to be eased whatever form of government we have got and whatever manifesto is implemented."

On the same programme Dr John Marks, chairman of the BMA council, could not accept claims that the NHS was better than it had ever been. People's perspectives related to what they saw in outpatients or the size of waiting lists. The public did not see the shift of money towards the Cinderella services of caring for the aged and the mentally handicapped for which the acute services were being squeezed.

Professor Maynard and Dr Marks were agreed that phasing out pay beds could be a hornets' nest for Labour. For one thing, it would ensure that private practice became concentrated in London, Manchester, and a few other cities, at the expense of patient choice in smaller provincial towns. For another, it would raise major problems of NHS control of consultants, which is easier if they have patients in NHS pay beds.

Doctors have appeared, too, on the party platforms. Labour enlisted Dr Berry Beaumont, who said that as a general practitioner in Islington she was forced to shop around for hospital beds, even for emergency admissions. It meant that a patient's chance of prompt treatment might depend on the doctor's informal contacts and not the patient's need.

The Conservatives fielded a panel of doctors to buttress their manifesto. Mr Nigel Harris, a consultant surgeon at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, rebuked those members of the profession who were denigrating the NHS for political purposes. He agreed with Professor Ian McColl, professor of surgery at Guy's Hospital, who said that if he was minister for health he would not give a penny to the NHS until it showed that the money could be used efficiently.

By the end of last week the differing perception of the Labour and Conservative policies on health had narrowed marginally. The remaining interest in the campaign will be to see if Labour can sustain its Gallup lead on health issues.