LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Too simple by half, says minister

JOHN WARDEN

A consensus is gaining ground in the House of Commons that the nation's health care is too important to be left to the Department of Health and Social Security. This view has now taken hold on the Conservative benches, and the implications could be considerable. Any discussion of the health service in the Commons these days is made uncomfortable for the government by its own supporters. Monday's second reading of the Health and Medicines Bill was no exception. Unease on the Tory benches goes deeper than the 10 abstentions over the new optical and dental charges.

It was the Tories, for example, who were first to confront the Minister for Health, Mr Tony Newton, with that morning's statement by the presidents of the royal colleges to the effect that acute hospital services are almost at breaking point through lack of resources (p 1505). The government, however, was unimpressed.

"Too simple by half," was Mr Newton's assessment, adding that a weakness in the statement was to associate pressures on the health service with demands for additional finance and not to address other causes of the difficulties, such as the nursing shortage. He advised the doctors to reflect further on the scope for improvements in clinical efficiency.

On the backbenches the Tory natives are restless. The DHSS is no longer the real target. They know that they have to direct their fire at the Treasury, or even the Prime Minister, if the necessary funding is to be made available. The first shots, like the customary backbench motion, are being prepared. But it will be a long campaign.

The more short tempered parliament becomes the longer it takes to get things done. That, at least, has been the experience in getting the new select committees off the ground. They were finally in place last week.

The social services select committee, which shadows the Department of Health and Social Security, has six new faces among its 11 members (p 1580). Its composition was disputed on several grounds. One was the perennial complaint that the committee is packed with placemen of the whips so as to avert trouble for the government. Then there was a dispute over the chairmanship, first because the party managers had agreed that it should stay with Labour. The Tory majority then vetoed the first nominee, Mrs Audrey Wise, who has far left tendencies. Labour's Mr Frank Field, once of the Child Poverty Action Group, and no respecter of either the Labour or Tory establishment, is now the chairman elect, to succeed Mrs Renée Short, who retired after 21 years in the chair.

It is a compromise grudgingly accepted by the Tory members of the committee, one of whom, Mr Nicholas Winterton, had this revealing comment to make about the outcome: "It shows the Tory party's instinctive disdain for the social services, in that never once in the time that the select committee has existed have they ever sought positively to chair what is now clearly the most politically important and sensitive select committee in the House of Commons, monitoring as it does the largest spending government department."

Nevertheless, the new committee does seem reasonably well equipped for its task, having among its members a doctor (Dr Lewis Moonie) and the chairman of a district health authority (Mrs Gillian Shephard).

An unusual case concerning the confidentiality of medical records came up through the ombudsman system last week at a select committee hearing. A patient changed doctors and laid a complaint against her former general practitioner. So that he could respond he asked for the return of the patient's records for checking. As is usual this was arranged by the family practitioner committee, acting as a clearing house. The returned records, however, contained material added by the new general practitioner, and the patient further complained of a breach of confidence.

The ombudsman (Parliamentary Commissioner) ruled that the family practitioner committee had failed to take steps to prevent improper disclosure of the new records. He found that the complainant had suffered an injustice and reported it to the select committee.

It is rare for the ombudsman's ruling to be challenged, but the Bradford family practitioner committee did so—on the grounds that its staff must in no circumstances examine confidential records that pass through the office. The chairman, Mr James Fergusson, told the committee: "We simply act as a post office. Our staff would no more look at the contents of the envelope than a postman would look at private mail."

He thought that the public would view with dismay any suggestion that family practitioner committee administrative staff should have the right to interfere with confidential records or, worse still, edit their contents. It was for the new doctor to decide whether he should extract any records that he had created.

The ombudsman maintained that it would have been better for the staff to break the general rule, which would have been a more acceptable breach of confidentiality than the one that occurred. In reply Dr Andrew Belton, a family practitioner committee member and lately chief examiner of the Royal College of General Practitioners, argued that if there was a communication from one doctor to another then there was no breach of confidentiality.

In the end, the select committee decided to seek guidance from the DHSS, whose officials will give evidence in the new year.

Government's conflict on alcohol

The conflict between this government's libertarian instincts and its worries about alcohol abuse are made sharper each month. A House of Lords debate called attention to the incidence of abuse. In the course of it a medical peer, Lord Rea, noted that the mortality from cirrhosis of the liver among doctors was exceeded only by that among the likes of sailors and journalists. Was it due to the stress of dealing with the sick and dying? More plausibly, Lord Rea traced doctors' drinking back to medical school and the long hours worked as juniors.

Last month, too, there landed on the government's lap an uncompromising report of a Home Office study on young people, alcohol, and crime. It recommended a total ban on alcohol advertising on television, which ministers will resist. They will soon have to decide, however, on another proposal that under age drinking should be a criminal offence. At the moment it is an offence knowingly to serve under 18s. The Home Office is considering whether to bear down harder on licensees with amendments to the Licensing Bill after the new year.