LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Primary care proposals: minister wins grudging plaudits from opposition

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All of a sudden, there it was, the most eagerly awaited document since the news was brought from Ghent to Aix. The "Green Paper" on primary care had arrived—though ministers made it clear that it was a discussion document and not a Green Paper. Its publication—already 18 months overdue—suffered one final delay. The government had intended to take the wraps off its package the previous week, but events in Libya interceded.

The worst fears of politicians were not realised; what was not in the discussion document inspired as much interest as what it contained. There was no open advertising of doctors' services proposed, though a wider dissemination of information is desired. There was no promotion of private primary care along American lines, nor any charges by doctors for more expensive services. And, crucially, the still unseen Binder Hamlyn recommendations, thought to propose cash limits on the family practitioner service, have been put on the back burner or even incinerated entirely.

The Labour spokesman, Frank Dobson, was relieved by what had been left out of the paper. "Fortunately, none of them appear in full frontal form in the Green Paper," he declared. "The government have backed away from the consequences of their own ideology." To be fair, he tried his damndest to launch some form of critical attack on Mr Fowler, if only for the sake of appearances.

There was concern that too little attention had been paid to the problems of the rural areas and those where heavy industry has been run down. On inner cities, Mr Dobson complained that few of the 114 recommendations of the Acheson report had been implemented. Also, the dentistry proposals "seem unlikely to counteract the soaring cost of dental treatment and the gradual disappearance of the NHS dental service." And Mr Dobson returned to a general onslaught on the government's funding policies, declaring that the propositions will have little impact on the health of the worst off and least healthy people in the community.

It was all music to Mr Fowler's ears; Labour were "scratching around" for gripes and Mr Dobson seemed almost "disappointed" that the proposals were so reasonable.

But the Secretary of State has played a clever political game since reform of the family practitioner service was first mooted in 1984. Rather than rush headlong into certain controversy armed with some of the more radical ideas that were floated originally, he stirred the professions into putting out their own proposals in anticipation of the Green Paper. The government was able to take some of these on board, add a few of its own, and present a package that it knew in advance would attract support. Mr Fowler's long game was facilitated by the midstream change of health ministers, which provided another excuse for delay.

But the postponement could have one major disadvantage. With the consultation period expected to last until the end of the year, any necessary legislation may be impossible to enact before the next general election, particularly if Mrs Thatcher calls one early.

Mr Fowler also held out the prospect of a White Paper in advance of legislation so his retort to Liberal MP David Alton, "I think you would be unwise to assume that legislation could not come in the lifetime of this government," may have been a little overoptimistic.

On the substance of his primary care proposals, Mr Fowler won plaudits all round, albeit somewhat grudgingly from the opposition.

Conservative congratulations were fulsome, though some backbenchers looked forward to the consultation process extending the recommendations.

Mr Roy Galley (Halifax) wanted a root and branch reform of "the present complex and haphazard system of doctors' remuneration" and hoped that the proposed good practice allowance and a capitation element in remuneration amounted to just such an overhaul. The government should not throw away a great opportunity to abolish all the various additions that are now part of the remuneration calculations. Mr Galley wanted to see instead a basic payment topped up by a good practice allowance on the ground of merit and a capitation allowance for the amount of work done.

Mr Fowler took refuge in the recommendations of the Royal College of General Practitioners—the basis of the Green Paper reforms in this area—in his reply. "At present a large proportion of a GP's income comes from allowances and about one third comes from capitation fees. We want to change both these factors and that is fundamental to the proposals."

The new compulsory retirement age of 70 went down a treat with MPs, who have no such limit placed on their tenure of a coveted parliamentary seat. Jerry Hayes (Harlow) said that many of his constituents had written to him complaining of the small minority of doctors who, "quite frankly are too old, too rude, and too incompetent to do their jobs."

Mr Hayes is a mere stripling of 33; perhaps his words will return to haunt him as he approaches three score years and ten. But Mr Fowler had in his brief a collection of statistics suggesting that it was time that a good few doctors hung up their stethoscopes. The latest government information is that there are 515 practising doctors in their 70s, 74 in their 80s, and two in their 90s. The House of Lords can probably match that for practising legislators.

Slow haul over Debendox claims

A few years back there was widespread unease at the apparent effect of the drug Debendox, with evidence linking it to deformities in children. Recently, the Labour campaigner, Jack Ashley, called on the Minister for Health, Barney Hayhoe, to support the parents who are trying to sue the manufacturers, Merrell Dow, in the United States courts.

More than 800 British families claim that Debendox has crippled their children for life, with many unable to walk or talk, or suffering brain, heart, or liver damage. In the British courts the parents would have to prove not only that Debendox caused the deformities but that the company was totally negligent, something that could take years, cost a fortune, and be ultimately unsuccessful.

A recent appeal court decision in Washington DC has been seen by Mr Ashley as a "landmark case." He told Mr Hayhoe in a letter that it effectively demolished Merrell Dow's claim that no court had ever ruled against them.

The legal battle has raged on for six years. In 1980 80 British families formed the Debendox Action Group and four years later three of the parents reached an out of court settlement with Merrell Dow. But in September 1984 the settlement was set aside by a higher American court on the grounds of illegality. Eventually, the US federal courts threw out the British applications to have their cases heard in America. Merrell Dow has always denied liability.