LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

"The best health service the nation has ever had," claims Prime Minister

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The Conservative women are not given to displays of rebelliousness, but amid the beautifully delivered speeches that made up the debate on the National Health Service last week at their annual conference in the Barbican Centre there were a couple of warning shots fired in the direction of Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Minister for Health. The cause was the limited list. One lady told him that the way that it had been presented had caused bad publicity for the government, and another accused the health ministers of having given the opposition a "trump card" in the form of the list. "Since it has been implemented every doctor's surgery has become an opposition party headquarters," she said. "Why did we not explain it is pure common sense to change and substitute generic drugs for brand name drugs? The whole programme could have been so much more successful. I applaud your work, minister, but we are not perfect yet."

Mr Clarke took note of what had been said but did not rise to the bait. Health is clearly an issue, however, on which the conference felt strongly, particularly on the need to control staff numbers, cut waiting lists, and reduce waste. The Prime Minister, who is acutely conscious of her boast that the NHS is safe in her hands, went out of her way, when she spoke immediately after Mr Clarke, to include a lengthy passage on the NHS in her speech. Claiming that one accusation that she resented most about her government was that alleging cuts where there had been none, she declared that the accusations of cuts in the NHS would simply not stand examination in the light of the facts.

"There are more doctors, more dentists, more health visitors, more district nurses, more home helps, more patients treated, more new hospitals—51 major hospital schemes built or being built by the government—and 20% more spending on the NHS, after taking account of inflation," Mrs Thatcher claimed. "These are not cuts, they are increases. Under this Conservative government we have the best health service the nation has ever had."

Another warning shot directed at Mr Clarke elicited no response. One lady urged him to scotch the rumour, "please," that American management was being brought into the NHS. There are some things that cannot be asked of any minister, and that was one of them since the rumour that the lady had in mind was a reply Mrs Thatcher gave to a question from Labour's health spokesman, Mr Frank Dobson, in which she confirmed that such discussions about a possible pilot scheme had been taking place. "We have no plans at present for a centrally promoted scheme of the type described, but if any health authority is satisfied that such an arrangement is in the interests of NHS patients the government will look sympathetically at the proposals," she said.

The very thought is seen by Labour spokesmen as a bonus that the government is daft to send winging their way, and the whole topic should provide lots of heated political argument. Will the NHS be safe in American hands?

Mr Dobson has decided to take up the report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir Gordon Downey, in which he qualified his certificate to the 1983-4 NHS accounts because of a failure by health authorities to collect private patient charges. He has written to Mr Robert Sheldon, chairman of the all party Commons Public

Accounts Committee, asking that it investigate the present level of charges for pay beds in the NHS. The blame for the failure to collect all the money due is said to lie with bad administration, although there have been other less charitable explanations offered. But there is no doubt that it is an ideal topic for the Public Accounts Committee to look at. Mr Dobson's case is that the calculation of NHS charges to private patients remains amateur and unbusiness-like.

He wants the committee to investigate whether, even if all the income was collected, the level of NHS charges from private patients would bring in net earnings for the NHS. "You will be aware that the suspicion that charges to private patients are subsidised by the taxpayer has long been prevalent in British politics," he said. "However, the opponents of commercial medicine do not stand alone in this debate. Representatives of private hospitals are quite adamant that NHS private patients do not pay the full costs of their treatment."

Powell Bill will not lie down

Meanwhile, Mr Enoch Powell's Unborn Children (Protection) Bill will not lie down. On Friday 7 June, a day for private members' Bills, Mr Andrew Bowden, Tory MP for Brighton Kempton, has come top in the ballot. He plans to move a business motion that would allow the Bill to complete all its stages in the Commons. The House would have to sit indefinitely until that happened. I understand that Mr John Biffen, leader of the House, will speak during the debate and unless this ruse is to be used again he will have to declare the government's hand.

The barrage of letters from the public still arrives on MPs' desks soliciting support for the Powell proposals. Mr Dobson's reply makes the point that during the passage of his Bill Mr Powell revealed that he had not sought the views of any of the scientists or doctors engaged in research intended to reduce the incidence of congenital abnormalities and severe handicap or to eliminate some genetic diseases, and was therefore not aware of their concerns and fears or the consequences of what he proposed. In other words, Mr Dobson says, the Bill was drafted in ignorance.

"I believe that most, if not all, of the people in this country doing research on embryos are humane and decent people seeking to increase the sum of human happiness and to reduce the anguish of infertility," he adds. "However, I also believe that the time has come for society to establish machinery to control and monitor this work to prevent its benefits being perverted for evil ends. Strict control and supervision is necessary. A total ban is quite uncalled for."

Mr Dobson makes clear that he is sorry if the recipients of his letter do not share his views, but at least they will now know where he stands. His view is that the Warnock proposals would give too much power to doctors to make decisions when many of them could be left to women. Doctors should not be able to determine which women will have fertilisation techniques made available to them. He rejects surrogacy for money, while he is not opposed to surrogacy for love. But he does believe, unlike Warnock, that the purchase or sale of sperm, eggs, or embryos should be outlawed, and supports in vitro fertilisation for people to whom it can give the chance to have children.