LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Mrs Short turns prison visitor

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The Social Services Select Committee's decision to investigate the prison medical service seems to have set the cat among the pigeons. The committee is currently busily engaged in looking at the government's social security reviews, and that could delay the start of taking oral evidence at Westminster for the new inquiry. It will certainly not start before the Commons rises for the summer recess. But a programme of visits to prisons in England, Wales, and very probably Northern Ireland has been set up for the overspill period in October. The prison medical service in Northern Ireland is different from that in England, and the contrasts apparently interest the committee. It is not the responsibility of the Home Office for a start.

Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, chairman of the all party committee, told Mr David Mellor, Home Office Under Secretary, in the Commons during questions about the prison medical service that the BMA had received an enormous number of complaints from prisoners and former prisoners about the way that they had been treated in prison.

It seems that the preparatory work being done by the BMA—which has now set up a working group chaired by Sir Douglas Black to prepare evidence to the committee—has created some of the mutterings and unease at the Home Office. Mr Mellor, who had earlier said that he was satisfied with the operation of the service, although he recognised that there was a need for improvement in some areas, tried to pretend that he had said no such thing when it was repeated to his face by Mrs Short.

He took refuge in explaining that what he was satisfied about was that the service had better resources and was more able to cope with the demands of the prison population than it had been in the days of the Labour government.

The general huffing and puffing is causing the select committee no concern. The feeling is that it can do nothing but good, and that the very fact that it intends to take a look at the service might bring about in advance at least some of the improvements it would otherwise expect to have to call for in its report.

The committee's recent report on the misuse of drugs showed that the treatment available to drug addicts in prison was often only that they should go "cold turkey," and did nothing to quell the unease that prompted the decision to have the investigation.

Mr Enoch Powell has not given up his fight to get experiments on human embryos banned, and along with MPs from the Labour, Liberal, and Conservative parties has launched a new campaign, Call for Action, aimed at outlawing the use of human embryos as research guinea pigs.

One object of the MPs supporting the campaign will be, if the government does nothing soon, to introduce another Bill next session. So far about 45 are said to have agreed to enter the ballot for backbenchers' time, and the more supporters who do that the better the chance of getting a place that will allow them to get another debate on the issue. Mr Powell believes that the Warnock report is now dead so far as its recommendations on embryo experiments are concerned, and that it was killed as a result of the debates on his Bill.

"What is necessary now is to save the government from throwing itself into the grave after Warnock, by including in urgently needed legislation provisions, which parliament would not accept and which would not stand up to serious examination," he said.

The warning is clear enough, and it is one that ministers cannot ignore. The Warnock Bill, when it eventually comes, will have to be dealt with on a free vote, and that means that a pressure group as strong as that mustered behind Mr Powell can be difficult to deal with. Normally the whips would keep things under control, but they will have no locus.

Meanwhile the Surrogacy Arrangements Bill, which bans commercial surrogate baby agencies, received an unopposed third reading in the House of Lords on 12 July. It now awaits the Royal Assent. During the debate Lord Denning said that the Bill did not prevent the commissioning or the carrying mother from paying or receiving money. He called for urgent legislation to ban all surrogacy arrangements for money.

Patients' rights and duties

The Hospital Complaints Procedure Bill, introduced by Mr Michael McNair-Wilson, Newbury (Conservative), after his own experiences in hospital, completed its Commons stages without undue incident and will now become law. He was unable to handle its final stages, since he had to be in hospital as an outpatient on a dialysis machine on the day. It was a pity, since the task of piloting it through fell to Mrs Edwina Currie, Derbyshire South (Conservative), a member of the Social Services Select Committee and the backbencher most likely to put people's backs up. During its passage through the Lords the Bill was amended to cover Scotland, hence the need for a debate because changes made there have to get the endorsement of the Commons. The changes now place the responsibility for dealing with complaints on district health authorities, not just regional health authorities, thus ensuring that all authorities with hospital management responsibility are covered.

Mr John Patten, the junior health minister, agreed with the combative Mrs Currie that it was right to say patients must be given all possible opportunities to air their complaints against hospitals. But he reminded her that patients also had a responsibility towards the hospitals in which they were treated, and that often included turning up on time, on the right day, and in the right place.

"The NHS suffers from a considerable waste of time when patients do not fulfil those responsibilities," he said. "There is a social contract between the patient and the NHS, which both sides should fulfil."

The Commons Home Affairs Committee has been taking evidence from the Customs and Excise on drug misuse and has been told that it is ironic that the government seems able to provide adequate resources for other law enforcement agencies but will not allow sufficient expenditure to protect the country against drugs.

It has also been told that harsher penalties for addicts and carriers, which seem to be the government's preferred solution, will not necessarily bring control within the community and that ways must be found to bring addicts not currently registered or notified to the attention of drug clinics and street agencies so that treatment and supportive measures may be applied. The corollary is that resources allocated to such clinics and agencies must be increased substantially.

But just what the chances are of the cash being found these days is anybody's guess. The point was also made that while the Social Services Committee might be able to carry out an inquiry of its own into the problem the solution lay in a unified strategy directed to prevention, control, and rehabilitation.