LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

That ever more elusive green paper

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It looks as if the green paper on general practice is not going to come out this summer after all. Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, is a well known one issue man and has only just begun to consider the draft prepared by Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Minister for Health. But public spending up to the next election is to be considered by the Cabinet at a special Chequers weekend later this month, and that is going to take up a lot of his attention since his is the largest budget of any Whitehall department.

Then there is the reshuffle, which the Prime Minister has indicated we can expect in the long summer recess. Mr Fowler has high hopes, and the last thing that he wants in advance of that is to find himself embroiled in a battle with the medical profession, since the green paper is going to be a trifle contentious, to say the least. So there is a good chance that we will not see the green paper before September, which will mean that it will have been delayed for over a year, good going even for the Department of Health and Social Security.

It is possible that it will contain proposals for a fixed retirement age, probably of 70, for general practitioners. While that may not find favour, it will be difficult to oppose in a social climate in which early retirement for other workers is ever more likely as unemployment proves so intractable a problem.

Meanwhile, Mr Clarke has dropped a great big hint that it will include various alternatives to the present system under which general practitioners are paid.

In a written Commons reply he told Mr John Taylor, Conservative MP for Solihull, that the subject was part of the review of the family doctor service on which the green paper would be based. Mr Taylor had asked if the DHSS was considering eliminating item of service payments in favour of increased capitation fees, reflecting general concern from both sides of the House about the number of such payments. Mr Clarke believes that general practitioners should accept that part of their overall responsibilities to care for patients includes at least some of the tasks that advances in technology have created.

Dr David Owen, leader of the Social Democrats, speaking at the Institute of Health Service Management's annual conference last week, also took a look at general practice and delivered a brisk attack on what he perceived to be the Prime Minister's wish to expand private family medicine. "This is a grave error," he warned. "It will be divisive and damaging to the National Health Service. But it will be something more. It will damage the cohesion of the nation."

He said that new forms of cooperation between family doctors and the rest of the NHS were needed, and he proposed the establishment of an NHS development fund on which they and general managers could draw. He said that at present the development margin in general practice was locked into the family doctors' own income, and the more done in terms of providing new services

and taking on work the greater their loss. New and positive incentives for cooperation and extra service had to be found.

Dr Owen said that a new kind of primary care funding would provide the focus and structure for better forms of regular cooperation and planning between family doctors and the rest of the NHS. Pilot schemes for a primary care organisation that crossed the present administrative boundaries were needed.

He suggested that doctors in an area might undertake routine care of people with diabetes, provide special help for very elderly patients—in cooperation with district nurses—or undertake to do more minor surgery. As for the cash, he proposed starting with an investment fund of £25m in the first year, £50m in the second, rising to over £150m at a pace that could be properly absorbed. It is an idea that has already been floated by the BMA's General Medical Services Committee in its 1984 publication *General Practice: a British Success*.

His message for Mrs Thatcher was to keep her hands off the NHS. She should concentrate instead on building on what was good and making a better family practitioner service. Primary care needed to be strengthened, but not by separating it from the NHS and not by stimulating an alternative private family practitioner service. He was, of course, on about a lot of the things that will appear in the green paper, which is aimed at extending the role of the general practitioner, but from the Social Democrats' point of view.

Renée Short, battling left winger, bows out

The next general election is still some way off, and it is a little premature to start saying farewell, especially to someone as formidable as Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, who chairs the all party Social Services Select Committee. But the battling left winger has decided not to stand for reselection—she fought off a challenge two years ago from a local left wing councillor, and the chances were that this time round she was not going to succeed, so she has bowed to the inevitable. Mrs Short, an MP for 21 years, is, however, 66, well past the retirement age for all except doctors and some politicians.

She still has some time to go, therefore, in the chair of her committee, a task that she performs with rather more brio than many other select committee chairmen. It is always possible to tell when she is suffering fools not very gladly from the way she rolls her eyes to the ceiling, a stark contrast to the usual pofaced behaviour of other chairmen. Mrs Short has expressive features.

Mr Enoch Powell's Unborn Children (Protection) Bill was seen off in fitting style, but, as I said last week, it is not the end of the affair. The speed with which his chums have rallied to sign a Commons motion congratulating him on his "courage, persistence, and industry" in seeking to use all the available parliamentary procedures to enable the Commons to consider all the stages of his Bill must have been a little disappointing. So far only 11 MPs have signed the motion tabled by Mr Teddy Taylor, Conservative MP for Southend East. I would have expected there to have been quite a rush.