LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

FPCs; professional conduct; and pay

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The report stage of the Health and Social Security Bill provided Labour with the chance to move a series of amendments to expand the role of family practitioner committees, which are given independent status under the Bill. They included placing a duty on family practitioner committees to promote health education and to set up, run, and monitor deputising services for general practitioners in their area. Labour also wanted all aspects of the work of family practitioner committees brought within the jurisdiction of the Health Services Commissioner, an argument that the government rejected at an earlier stage in the proceedings.

In the event Mr Frank Dobson did not press his amendments, but he did secure a useful discussion on the role of the new family practitioner committees. On deputising, he argued that it would be best if family practitioner committees organised such services as this would be bound to raise standards and the only people who would object would be the people profiteering out of the private services. Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, said that he was far from enamoured with the privately run services, blaming one in particular for issuing "scurrilous" propaganda that had helped to provoke the recent row over his proposals. But he saw Mr Dobson's plan as a way of introducing a salaried doctor service into the NHS. He hoped that the circular that he is producing on deputising would satisfy doctors and conceded that there had been a failure of communication between himself and the profession. "I accept my share of the blame," he added. "But other people were less than helpful. Not the Labour party, but one of the commercial deputising services." He hoped that everyone would be satisfied and said that deputising services were not being closed down, but equally doctors were not to be allowed in general practice to work a nine to five day, five days a week. That had never been the case. But doctors were entitled to expect not to have to work excessive hours. In any case, the majority of general practitioners did not use such services. The row had been with the minority.

Proposal to increase GMC's power

Mr Nigel Spearing, Labour MP for Newham South, has introduced a Bill in the Commons to increase the powers of the General Medical Council so that it can, if the professional conduct committee thinks fit, make continued registration of a medical practitioner conditional when it is judged that he has behaved in "a manner which cannot be regarded as acceptable professional conduct."

The Bill has the backing of Dr Maurice Miller, Labour MP for East Kilbride, a general practitioner, and Dr Brian Mawhinney, Conservative MP for Peterborough, a medical lecturer. It stands little chance of making any progress this late in the session, but Mr Spearing should get a second reading and a chance to ventilate the reasons why he believes that there should be such a change. He said this week that his purpose was not to change the constitution or obligations of the General Medical Council but to ensure that it had the powers needed to see that its procedures, particularly those relating to alleged negligence or misconduct, met the needs of the times.

"The Bill seeks to provide additional but discretionary powers that

events have shown necessary," he said. "Without such discretion, which many believe already exists, there could be justifiable concern in respect of the proper protection of the public."

His point is that it is only possible for the professional conduct committee to apply sanctions if in its view the proved conduct amounts to "serious professional misconduct." The Bill would enable it, if it thought fit, to make continued registration of a medical practitioner conditional if he is judged to have behaved in "a manner which cannot be regarded as acceptable professional conduct."

Mr Spearing's interest in the powers available to the General Medical Council arises from the case of a constituent whose 8 year old son died of meningitis in 1982. The general practitioner who treated him was censured by his family practitioner committee and fined £1000, and his case was referred to the General Medical Council by Mr Fowler. The General Medical Council, while it confirmed the decision, decided that the doctor was not guilty of serious professional misconduct, a finding which, Mr Spearing reckoned, showed a grave lacuna in its powers. His Bill is an attempt to remedy that.

The nurses have left Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, in no doubt as to what they want from the government over the recommendations of their pay review body—said to be for a 7% rise. They want the cash in their May pay packets. The report, along with that of the doctors' and dentists' review body, is still languishing in the Prime Minister's in tray, and the nurses' hopes seem remote, although what they get will be backdated.

Mr Michael Meacher, Labour's health and social services spokesman, in yet another letter to Mr Fowler, warned him last week that it would be unbelievably cynical if, having set up the review body after the 1982 National Health Service dispute to remove nurses' pay from the political arena, the government then refused to accept its own body's findings. Doctors, however, know well that with this government such behaviour is the norm rather than the exception when it comes to review body proposals that go against the grain of the times on pay.

As to how fast things will move on the reports, the word from No 10 is still that it will be weeks, not days. There is certainly no hint of anything stirring, and Mr Fowler would only tell the nurses that they must wait and see, but no decision had been taken. He did not deny suggestions that the proposed 7% was likely to be blocked. It is way beyond the 3% set for public sector pay last year by Mr Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and if it is correct it is firmly in the area that the government regards as difficult to agree to.

The problem with pay in the public sector is that it is the annual average that counts, hence the tendency to stage awards to ensure a lower figure for the financial year. As Mr Meacher has noted, it is going to be difficult for the government to dismiss whatever is proposed for the nurses out of hand, so staging may well prove to be the solution. Things have not been helped by the teachers rejecting 4.5% as "too little and far too late."

Settlements in the 6-8% area are regarded by the government as a headache, partly because such a proposal is not all that outlandish and rejection outright can seem unreasonable. On the other hand, it does mean ditching that 3% figure. Given that the government would like to emerge with something averaging out at around 4%, or maybe a little more if pushed, in order to hold the line set by Mr Lawson, staging for both awards would seem on the cards. But these are at the moment being played close to the chest.