LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Crumbling showpiece hospitals

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The Commons Public Accounts Committee dearly loves to take a look at the National Health Service, and its latest report returns to an old sore—the excessive cost of repairs to some of what were alleged to be NHS showpiece hospitals, almost before they had been put to use. The Sick Children's Hospital in Glasgow was a classic instance, but it was only one of 13 examples of crumbling showpiece hospitals. The report (16th report of the Committee of Public Accounts, 1983-4; House of Commons paper 113) notes that to date health authorities have recovered only £400 000, or about 1%, of the total rectification costs of £30m from the consultants responsible for the buildings, and serves notice that progress had better be reported at the end of the present financial year, or else.

The report is also critical of the slow response by health departments to the need for health authorities to establish cost effective systems for controlling stores and articles in use, including linen, in the NHS. It says that there is public concern, rightly, that NHS property is not being properly safeguarded. On accountability, it welcomes the system of annual reviews but says that urgent action is required in Scotland and Wales to produce overdue operational plans as a basis for effective reviews. It also warns the DHSS that when the committee returns to the subject it will want evidence of practical results achieved through the annual review system in England.

The Griffiths report is seen as a useful contribution to improving management in the NHS, and the parliamentary report notes that it could result in an appreciable change of emphasis in the management of the NHS. That would affect NHS manpower. But it is highly critical of the success health departments and authorities have had in bringing NHS manpower under control. "Quite inadequate" is the verdict. The Public Accounts Committee also concludes that it is unsatisfactory that the DHSS has failed to establish arrangements for monitoring the reduction of management staff achieved by health authorities as a result of the 1982 reorganisation, for comparison with the estimate of 3000 to 4000 posts.

An in tray stacked with pay reviews

The sport of the moment is to taunt the Prime Minister on the issue of nurses' pay. Mrs Thatcher has an in tray stacked with pay review reports, and she keeps insisting that all the reports have to be considered together and that she hopes to be able to make an announcement not later than just after the Whitsun recess. The justification for delay is that the government must assess the demands and the money available to meet them and act accordingly. That is fair enough in its way, but it does tend to assume that the several review bodies are looking at like professions, which is not the case. The Labour party reckons that she may have made a tactical mistake in not acting swiftly on the nurses' case, as they are clearly thought by the public to be deserving, and the longer she delays the longer it will be before they get anything. It seems that the advice Mr Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, has given, and will give, to his Cabinet colleagues is that there is really no alternative but to meet the recommendations of the nurses' review body if the body is to retain any credibility.

Mr Fowler also seems to have said that what is proposed for the doctors by their review body (thought to be around 7%) should also be met, though there the option of staging still appears to be on the cards. The review body reports have been in the Downing Street in tray rather longer than usual this year for various reasons, not least the fact that there are problems with other workers in the public sector and ministers are anxious to keep increases down to around 4% if possible, at least on average. The teachers, I suspect, are on a hiding to nothing because the Prime Minister has tended to stand firm on pay unless she can be bullied into movement because action is being taken that threatens the national interest. The teachers could never do that, and the miners are failing—so far. The nurses, of course, cannot take such action—that would destroy the special status that they have with the electorate—but if they could it would be of the kind that could shift monetarist mountains.

The Police and Criminal Evidence Bill, which one way or another has been the centre of considerable controversy, has now completed its Commons stages with the changes that the medical profession wanted more or less implemented. The original Bill, the one that caused the fuss, was one of the general election's casualties, so the changes to the revised version have been fewer than normal, the objections having been taken into account in the redrafting.

One issue that upset doctors was the proposals on intimate body searches. The topic surfaced during the report stage, this time in relation to children, when a Labour MP, Mr Robin Corbett, tried to amend it to place restrictions on when, how, and where they could be searched. The clauses were rejected by the government, but the attempt elicited from Mr Douglas Hurd, Minister of State, Home Office, a reaffirmation of the position on intimate searches. "We have repeatedly made it clear we hope all intimate searches, whatever the age of the person concerned, will be carried out by a doctor," he said. "There are occasions, however, when such searches must be carried out. If no one else can or will undertake it and a doctor is not present, cannot be found, or is unwilling to undertake it, it must still be done. I am afraid that remains the case whatever the age of the person concerned. If we imposed a rigid rule that required all searches of juveniles to be performed by a doctor and thus drew a distinction between juveniles and others, there would be an incentive to use juveniles for precisely the purpose we are trying to avoid."

He later made clear that what he had in mind was that there could be no guarantee that wicked men, such as terrorists, would not use children precisely because of the greater protection and consideration they rightly received. It would not, therefore, be sensible to recommend a provision saying that under no circumstances should there be an intimate search of a child, even under the age of 14, bearing in mind that what the Bill was referring to was searches that were absolutely necessary to avert some terrible tragedy in a police station.

"We propose that an officer may give authorisation only if he has reasonable grounds for believing that the person to be searched might have concealed on him an article which could be used to cause physical injury to himself or others and which might be so used while he is in police detention or in the custody of the court and that cannot be found without an intimate search," Mr Hurd said. "We have narrowed down the possibility of an intimate body search to cases when it is necessary to avert tragedy in a police station."

The Bill now goes to the Lords, but it looks as if it is over the worst.