LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Mrs Short "far from pleased" on Griffiths

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It used to be said of royal commissions that they took minutes and wasted years. After the decision by Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, on the Griffiths report there is every excuse for the social services select committee thinking that the remark could well apply to it. "He has just ignored what we recommended," Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East and chairman of the all party committee, complained last week. "He has gone ahead and acted against the united medical, nursing, and trade union opinion. It is rather extraordinary—he has accepted Griffiths hook, line, and sinker."

She said that the committee would want to consider how to react, and made clear that she is far from pleased that Mr Fowler's decision was not accompanied by his response to the select committee report. All he did was promise that the response, which is made in the form of a House of Commons paper, will be published shortly. "I think it is a real cock up," Mrs Short added. "Typical Norman. He is a bit out of favour at the moment, as you may have gathered."

The committee could decide to call him back to defend the decision, or review the response in the light of its report and produce a fresh report. She is critical of the idea that people can be found from inside the National Health Service to do the job of manager and get an extra £3000 a year for doing it. Her view is that if they are there already, what on earth are they doing if they are not already managing it properly? She also regards it as a bit thick for all this extra money to be spent on management when the eternal complaint is that money is in short supply and there must be savings.

Her committee is also currently having a look at perinatal mortality in the light of its report, and she said that there is going to be little comfort in its findings on that for Mr Fowler.

It is true that the rate has gone down, but the problems remain the same and the highest incidence is still among women with a poor social background. Mr Fowler cannot sit back and congratulate himself on that issue either as far as she is concerned. Her intention is to get the review, a fairly short report, out later this summer.

Griffiths in Scotland and Wales

Returning to Griffiths, that was, of course, a report for the management of the NHS in England. So what about Scotland and Wales? Mr George Younger, Secretary of State for Scotland, has now issued a consultative document setting out his plans to establish a management function in the Scottish health service. The first step will be the appointment by the 15 health boards of a general manager followed by the closer participation of professional staff in management.

At present the boards are required to manage by consensus. Mr Younger's intention is that the new managers should be appointed as soon as possible and certainly by the end of next year. They will be given responsibilities akin to those of an accounting officer to a government department, which means that they will be eligible for questioning by the Commons Public Accounts Committee. Mr

Younger also wants clinicians to be more closely integrated into the Scottish NHS management structure. Comments on his proposals are sought by the end of September.

Mr Nicholas Edwards, Secretary of State for Wales, has set a deadline of 1 April 1985 for the appointment of district general managers in the Welsh NHS. Unit general managers have also to be appointed, and he will review progress in 1987. Mr Edwards intends in addition to set up a health policy board, which he will chair.

Data Protection Bill: BMA wins battle

The battle that the medical profession has been waging over the Data Protection Bill's proposals for medical records was won during the report stage in the Commons. A government amendment to meet the objections of the British Medical Association, which feared that bodies outside the health service, including the police, would be able to consult patients' records held on computers, was moved by Mr David Waddington, Home Office Minister of State.

He said that the government recognised that without special safeguards the confidence and trust that existed between a patient and the health professional treating him would be seriously undermined. He insisted that the existing arrangements, whereby health data are not disclosed without the patient's consent except when disclosure is necessary to prevent a risk to public health or the information is sought by the police in connection with the investigation of an offence, were not undermined by the Bill. The new clause that he moved ensured that the consent of the doctor would have to be given before data were released to, for instance, the police. He said that the code being devised in consultation with the inter-professional working group, promised earlier this year by Mr Fowler, would thus be embodied in the Bill. In particular, provision would be made to ensure that health data were not disclosed to the police except in cases in which the seriousness of the offence in question was such that the public interest had to prevail over the subject's right to confidentiality. The order, which will give the government power to apply the code to health data held outside the NHS, is being drawn up in consultation with the profession.

Mr Denis Howell, shadow Home Office spokesman, said that the medical profession had mounted an extraordinary lobby on the issue because it feared that the Bill was detracting from the existing protection. The amendment was welcome, but he attacked the way it was written. No ordinary citizen reading the jargon used in the amendment could possibly understand it and would not have the faintest notion that it had anything to do with protecting health data. "Why on earth cannot we write in plain English exactly what we are doing?" he added. "We are protecting information about patients in the possession of doctors that should not be disclosed improperly. So why the devil cannot we say so in plain English?"

The amendment reads: "An order under subsection (3) above modifying the third data protection principle may, to such extent as the Secretary of State thinks appropriate, exclude or modify in relation to that principle any exemption from the non-disclosure provisions which is contained in part IV of this Act; and the exemptions from those provisions contained in that part shall accordingly have effect subject to any order made by virtue of this subsection." Why the devil not, indeed.