LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Two different health services?

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Observers at this year's round of party political conferences—there are now four to endure—may be forgiven for wondering whether Britain has two different health services. Certainly, the Conservative and the Labour parties seem determined to view the National Health Service from different ends of the telescope. But first let me report on the problem of drug abuse, a worrying subject that was on the agenda of both the Conservative and Liberal gatherings. The demand at both was for government action to deal with an alarming and rapidly worsening social problem to try and stop things getting out of control. Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, responded in Brighton last week by announcing a package of measures, some of which even fulfilled the Liberals' demands. He assured the Conservative conference that the government had no compassion whatever for the cold and calculating men who traded in drugs and caused the suffering.

"Our job is to nail them and to hit them hard," he said. The package consists of both deterrent and preventive measures, and it is on the latter that ministers pin their hopes. An extra £5m is to be provided on top of the £7m given so far for prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. The money will be made available over the next 12 months, but whether it is all spent will depend on viable projects being put up as ministers consider that there is no point in simply throwing money at the problem. The chief deterrent measure that he announced is the intention to introduce life sentences for those trafficking in the worst drugs, heroin and cocaine. But that will take a little time as the necessary Criminal Justice Bill will not be introduced until the 1985-6 session of parliament. Meanwhile, however, the customs and excise is to get an extra 100 officers for its special drug squad and that is seen as a major weapon in the battle against the pushers.

Mr Clarke also announced new guidelines for doctors on the best clinical practice for treating drug abusers. He said that ministers had been concerned about "a few sleazy medical practices" that had been irresponsibly prescribing drugs to addicts. Action had been taken to deal with them.

"But I believe better guidance for doctors is needed," he added. "At the end of this month we shall be sending out guidelines to all doctors on the best clinical practice for treating drug abusers. There will be no excuses for sloppy prescribing in the future."

At the Liberal assembly three weeks earlier in Bournemouth an attempt was made to get the party to back a call for the right to be restored to doctors to supply addicts with pure heroin. Mr David Alton, MP for Mossley Hill, Liverpool, warned, however, that such a course could result in general practitioners being subjected to threats and blackmail. "Many doctors are sincere and dedicated people, but you cannot count on the fact that they all are," he said. "There are bad doctors. Even worse, it would expose general practitioners, particularly in the inner city areas, to those evil men, the drug pushers, those Mafia type figures. They will blackmail, intimidate, and bludgeon doctors into providing heroin." The assembly heeded his warning and rejected the plan.

The Conservatives also had a general debate on health, and in it Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, mounted a powerful defence of the government.

He said that the latest figures showed that last year three and a half million more people were treated by National Health Service hospitals than in 1978, the last year of the Labour government. This was an all time record and showed that the NHS was providing more care, more services, and more help for patients than at any stage in its history. He was critical, as were many from the floor, of the ever growing numbers of administrators in the service—these have risen to 108 000, an increase of half since 1971. That total must be reduced, he declared. He was also adamant about carrying on with the policy of privatising ancillary services: if the private sector showed it could do the job better it should be given the chance. While he did not respond to a call for generic prescribing he did warn that something had to be done about the size of the drugs bill and doctors' prescribing habits.

Minister rejects alternative funding for NHS

On the conference sidelines Mr Clarke firmly squashed gossip about alternative funding—this social hare always starts running when the hard choices on departmental spending are being considered in the autumn and the so called star chamber court of ministers is set up to adjudicate. Mr Clarke said that he wanted to keep a health service financed by taxation and free at the point of delivery for the rest of his life, and that ministers were satisfied that it was possible for the NHS at present to deliver the required quality of care in a fair way to society with the present method of financing.

The Labour conference in Blackpool ignored the advice of its national executive and backed a proposal to put the responsibility from hospital to community care firmly under the control of the NHS rather than local authorities. It also reaffirmed its opposition to private medicine and was particularly bullish on the sale of blood. Miss Anne Weyman of the Socialist Health Association demanded that blood and tissues obtained by the NHS should not be supplied to the private sector, demanding that the private sector should also be prevented from obtaining blood free. Labour also called for a charter of patients' rights, which would give a patient access to his medical records, and supported a commitment to control general practitioner deputising services so that out of hours cover should be provided by general practitioners combining in groups.

It was all pretty predictable rhetoric, but the same could be said of the Tories. What is so striking is that they are clearly talking about two totally different national health services, one thriving, one in total disarray, but with on both sides total conviction that they are telling the truth. Labour also reiterated its policy of taking the drug companies into public ownership, ending all private beds in the NHS, and abolishing all NHS charges.

The Social Democrats, who launched the conference season in Buxton in mid-September, did not specifically debate health, but during its discussions the party renewed its commitment to increase spending on the NHS. There is division, however, over whether the extra cash should be directed at high technology medicine—heart and kidney transplants and so on—or concentrated on prevention. There was much support from SDP women for the latter, particularly for improved and extended cancer screening.