LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

"No notes Clarke" dazzles select committee

WILLIAM RUSSELL

There are times when Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Minister for Health, seems almost too clever by half. Invited to give evidence to the Social Services Select Committee, which is inquiring into community care with special reference to adult mentally ill and mentally handicapped people, he proceeded to dazzle it with a display of ministerial omnipotence. "No notes Clarke" should be his nickname.

Actually, Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, who chairs the all party committee, had to get the clerk to open the windows, otherwise everyone would have nodded off, drowned in the torrent of words that flowed from Mr Clarke on everything and anything. At one point he turned to Lord Glenarthur, the junior Health Minister, and suggested it was about time that he said something. The poor man was allowed to utter one sentence before being interrupted.

Mr Clarke told the committee that he did not believe that care in the community was likely to prove cheaper than hospital based care, but overall cost was not a major consideration. It was important to break down professional and institutional boundaries, he said. Progress in taking care of the mentally ill and handicapped into the community varied from one part of the country to another, and depended on concentrating people's minds on the need to replace institutional facilities as rapidly as possible with the right facilities within the community.

Mrs Short provoked the liveliest exchange when she told him that one of the topics people raised with the committee as it went round the country taking evidence was what would happen to the splendid grounds that surrounded many of the institutions.

"We are not preserving buildings just because the neighbours like the greenery," Mr Clarke replied. Mrs Short said that something had to be done with them, and was told that they could be sold and the money used for the National Health Service. "This is not taking a philistine view," Mr Clarke added. "Freudian slip," Mrs Short retorted, pointing out that nobody had accused him of so doing. Mr Clarke said that the NHS existed to provide patient services, and that when hospitals were closed down everyone started struggling to find uses for the buildings. If there was no use for a building it was the duty of ministers to sell it for the maximum possible price and divert the funds raised to patient care.

He also made it clear that the government will look at the possibility of providing bridging loans for health authorities who find that they have to maintain institutions at full cost while building up care in the community services.

Mr Clarke conceded that mistakes had been made in the early days about the whole concept when patients were discharged without adequate provision being made for them. A depressing number of people under the arches at Charing Cross were patients discharged from mental hospitals in that way. A repetition of that had to be avoided. Some of the institutions that the government had inherited should have been closed years ago. That was not to criticise the staff. He admired their dedication in providing care in unsuitable nineteenth century buildings. But they must be closed and something better provided.

The committee has now virtually completed that inquiry and will begin writing its report for publication in the new year.

Two pronged attack on drug abuse

The committee's next inquiry will be into drug abuse and will be held in parallel with one undertaken by the Home Affairs Select Committee, which will deal with means of prevention and control. While Mrs Short's committee will be looking at how addicts are treated and at the rehabilitation process, the home affairs committee will concentrate on how to stop smuggling, on how the police deal with drug abuse, and on what changes should be made in the law as it affects pushers and addicts. The remits of the two committees are clearly defined, and Mrs Short would not accept that there will be any duplication of effort. In any case, she firmly rules out the idea of a joint inquiry. Select committees are quite big enough as it is, and a double one would be far too unwieldy. She says that the committee will want to visit some of the units and clinics that treat addicts and will want to take evidence from the medical profession and from the parents of addicts. "It is hard drugs, not amphetamines and the like, that we are after," she says. "It is a very worrying problem." And if anybody wonders how to go about submitting evidence to the inquiry all they need do is ring Rosemary Challis on 01 219 5466.

Ministers are concerned about the growth of drug abuse, and Mr John MacKay, the Scottish Health Minister, appealed last week for a community wide campaign to combat dealers, the most evil people in our society, and identify their victims.

"This problem will not be beaten simply by throwing money and words at it," he said. "Drug abuse can only be fought in the communities which it now threatens. Local people have got to work together with the police, the social services, and the health services. We have got to get across to young people the terrible consequences of drug taking."

A measure of the problem is the fact that in Scotland alone some 6000 young people are estimated to be using hard drugs.

The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley, according to Burns—or words to that effect. It means that you do not always get what you want. That has been the fate of Sir Gerard Vaughan, the former health minister, who had hoped to oust Mrs Jill Knight, Conservative MP for Edgbaston, from the chairmanship of the Conservative backbench health committee as part of a bid to return to his old field. Mrs Knight, however, fought off the challenge and the committee has decided to take up arms against the militant animal rights movement. Professor Owen Wade of Birmingham University, an expert on animal experimentation, is to brief the MPs as a first step in their counteroffensive. Mrs Knight said that she was most concerned about the way that the activists were messing up experiments on animals, a part of medical research that was of enormous value to everybody.

In the Lords last week Earl Jellicoe, chairman of the Medical Research Council, issued a warning that without more government cash the future of Britain's medical research programme could be in danger. The position had been made more serious by reductions in support by the University Grants Committee for university research, he said. And he warned that a position could arise in which the country's ability to exploit new opportunities in medical research would be hamstrung by the shortage of trained workers. Two major problems had to be tackled—absence from work and the increasing number of old people suffering from senile dementia. The Medical Research Council needed more cash in both areas for a continued attack on the problems and he urged ministers to ponder both the dangers and the opportunities facing them and the country.