LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Short to study Griffiths

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The decision by parliament's Social Services Committee, which was reappointed just before Christmas—late in the session because of wrangles with the minority opposition parties over the membership of some of the other specialist committees—to conduct a brief inquiry into the proposals contained in the Griffiths report on NHS management will give the medical profession another platform from which to voice its doubts. The all party committee's chairman will once again be Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, and the first witnesses to be heard will come from the BMA and the Royal College of Nursing. The likelihood is that Mr Kenneth Clarke, the health minister, will appear for the government. The committee intends to complete taking evidence by the first week in February and to report by the end of the month. It is exactly the kind of inquiry such a committee should do—short, sharp, topical investigations are worth months of ponderous study that invariably end up with a curate's egg of a report that ministers ignore. The suggestion to tackle Griffiths appears to have come from some of the new young Tory MPs on the committee.

The intention of the government is to implement Mr Roy Griffiths' proposals from April, but the consultation period on his proposals has only just ended, and time is being allowed for postal delays created by the Christmas and New Year holidays. That response has now to be analysed. Nor has anything yet been decided about the post of chief executive. A job description has still to be drawn up, and the task of finding somebody to fill it can then begin. Ministers have not decided whether to use head hunters, and if they do who the head hunter will be, which makes talk of a salary of around £60 000 a year purely speculative.

The opposition to the Griffiths plans that is emerging has taken ministers aback as the initial response appeared to be largely favourable. Mr Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, was told in no uncertain terms last week by Mr Anthony Grabham, chairman of the BMA council, about the hostility of the profession to the plan to restructure the management of the National Health Service by introducing new managerial posts. In a letter to Mr Fowler he claimed that what Griffiths appeared to want was a somewhat autocratic executive manager to take over the running of health authorities, and he said that while such appointments might be necessary and desirable in trade and commerce they could have no place in the NHS, which depended on a number of caring professions working together as a team in the interests of patients (14 January, p 165).

Ministers have been giving—indeed had been under—the impression that there was backing for Griffiths, and the BMA's strictures apparently came out of the blue. They are certainly bad news. But ministers will fight back strongly. They are enthusiastic about Griffiths, and Mr Grabham is likely to be told that he has got it all wrong and that the new managers are seen as people who will assist the caring professions in doing their work as efficiently as possible within available resources and do not represent any threat to their ability to do their job.

The other issue on which problems have arisen with the profession is the determination of ministers to do something about deputising services. Mr Clarke has written to Dr John Ball, chairman of the

General Medical Services Committee, making clear that something will have to be done to stop the abuse through overuse by some doctors of the deputising services. It is something ministers feel strongly about (p 257).

The evidence of excessive use has been provided to ministers, who know well that it is something the public will back them on. Patients are all too familiar with the strange, unfriendly stand in who knows nothing about them. Now that parliament is back ministers hope that with one of the principal channels through which the public makes its views known—the local MP—reopened they will get fresh evidence with which to counter the profession's views.

It had looked when we rose for Christmas that there were politically calmer waters ahead in the New Year so far as health was concerned. But now quite clearly there are troubled times ahead. Action on the Binder-Hamlyn report, which proposes ways of improving accountability in the family practitioner services, is still said to be timed for the end of this month or early next month, but it is likely to be a moveable feast. It will be controversial and will require the acquiescence of the profession, and if there are other squabbles going on there is no point in adding to them. The row about deputising services is seen as one possible way of securing some movement on retirement age. Ministers are appalled at the way some doctors cling on to their practices—there are three over 90 still working—and since they must in the nature of things rely on deputising services there could be an opportunity to move on the problem there.

NHS budget criticised

The latest dollop of cash for the NHS that Mr Fowler had just handed out has provoked considerable criticism from the unions and the opposition (p 258). Last week Mr Fowler announced an extra £83m for the ten regional health authorities outside London. The money restored the cuts made last July by Mr Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and a little more, and according to Mr Fowler it meant real growth for the NHS of some 1%. He claimed that as a result of what he was able to do health authorities should be able to take up new medical advances and continue to improve services for the mentally ill, the handicapped, those with renal failure, and those needing hip replacements.

"A massive confidence trick," complained Mr David Williams, general secretary of COHSE. The plans would mean more cuts and ward closures. Mr Bob Jones for NUPE said that the scale of funding did no more than restore last year's cuts and warned that the future was bleak for all health service workers, including doctors and nurses. Mr Michael Meacher, shadow social services spokesman, said that Mr Fowler's calculations were incredible, calculating that health authorities would end up £120m worse off.

The other political issue that will rage over the coming months looks like being the implications of the Trade Union Bill for organisations like the BMA. The problems were discussed at an hour long meeting last week with officials at the Department of Employment, with the Minister of State, Mr John Selwyn Gummer, looking in briefly. It does appear that there is little likelihood of the Bill being amended to exclude organisations like the BMA caught in the government's net. It may not be the sort of trade union they had in mind when introducing the legislation, but it is indisputably a trade union and must, say ministers, accept the obligations.