Letter from Westminster

Storm cones already hoisted on UGC cuts

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Having written last week about the advantages of the Scottish dimension for the NHS, it was a happy coincidence to find the views of Mr Allan Stewart, the Scottish Office Health Minister, who argued the case, being borne out by one of his officials giving evidence to the Social Services Select Committee. This committee is now taking evidence on the effects of the university cuts on medical teaching. It did not go down at all well with the officials from the DHSS when Mr John Walker, an under secretary in the Scottish Home and Health Department, was able to present a far clearer picture of what was going to happen in Scotland, and to tell them that £700 000 had been set aside to save about 30 university posts. Mr James Collier, a deputy secretary at the DHSS, was far less forthcoming on cash and insisted that only if the position got worse—about 400 posts were expected to vanish—would the Department hold back money already allocated to the NHS to provide a contingency fund. But there would be no new money. It was one of those fencing match sessions with the committee in which the DHSS officials seemed unwilling to say anything much, and it clearly irritated the MPs. There is something about the mandarin blandness that is far more infuriating than parliamentary abrasiveness, with which they know how to cope. Mr Collier insisted that despite the storm cones little specific evidence of difficulty had yet come forward from England or Wales. This took Mrs Renée Short, the committee's redoubtable chairman, quite aback. "We have had a large number of representations and the storm cones appear to be well and truly hoisted," she snorted.

Dr Mike Abrams, a senior principal medical officer at the DHSS, told the committee that if a university believed that by deliberately axing posts the health authority would pick up the tab, it would inevitably axe the posts. It was, therefore, not in the Department's interests, or proper for it, to reveal the exact details of what it planned to do. "A very easy get-out," Mrs Short commented. Mr David Ennals, the former Social Services Secretary, pointed out that the cuts would take effect from 1 April when the posts would go, and he could not believe that at this stage, two months before, the area health authority and the university concerned had not got together and worked out the consequences of what the university intended to do. He could not understand why they had not made representations to the DHSS. "They have not," Dr Abrams replied. "Well, they bloody well ought to," Mr Ennals said, before withdrawing the epithet, which may be accurate but is unparliamentary.

More stick for Dr Vaughan

The row over the new abortion form (HSA 4) has led to Dr Gerard Vaughan, the Health Minister, being accused of trying to alter the law by the back door. It is a charge that has stung to the quick. Nor is the row showing much signs of dying down. So far 55 Labour MPs have signed a Commons motion sponsored by Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, Labour's health spokesman, deploring the actions of the DHSS in "attempting

to introduce a narrow interpretation" of the 1967 Abortion Act without the consent of Parliament. It also calls on the Government to withdraw the amended form. Mrs Dunwoody—who clearly sees the hand of Dr Vaughan behind the form—complained that if Ministers, because of their personal views, believed changes were required in the law they should openly debate the matter in the Commons.

Dr Vaughan has, however, hit back. If anybody is trying to change the law by the back door, so far as he is concerned, it is those who have embarked on what he considers to be "an extremely well organised campaign." Last March the HSA 3 form was replaced with one more strictly based on the wording of the Act. The old form included a question asking a doctor to set out the grounds for termination of pregnancy, which had three subsections, the third of which asked for non-medical grounds. It was a question intended to be answered in full, not one in which the person replying could opt for any of the subsections. The new form has redrafted the grounds for termination, and has omitted the subsection dealing with non-medical grounds since they were not part of the parent Act. It is this omission that has caused the fuss. Dr Vaughan sees it as an attempt by those who believe in progressive abortion or abortion on demand to subvert the law by misinterpreting what happened.

What happened was that on 1 May last year Dr Vaughan was told by Sir Henry Yellowlees, the Chief Medical Officer, that a few doctors had not filled the new forms in properly. They were returned on the CMO's suggestion to the doctors in July, and most of the doctors concerned returned them properly completed. Between 30 and 40 doctors asked for clarification, and got it. That left a handful holding out, and their names were referred by the CMO to the DPP for a legal ruling as he is required to do under the Act. The reference had nothing to do with the Minister. Dr Vaughan maintains that those people who believe that the CMO's interpretation of the law is wrong should challenge it in the proper way through Parliament or the courts.

It is not often that an Opposition MP manages to extract a positive reply from the Prime Minister—Mrs Thatcher is, after all, not in the business of giving such a boost to her political opponents. But she was unequivocal last week in her assurance to Mr Michael Meacher, Labour MP for Oldham West and a former junior minister at the DHSS, that legislation on data protection is urgently needed and will be introduced in the new session of Parliament this autumn. Meanwhile there is to be a White Paper.

The storing of medical information on computers is an issue that has been, and still is being, widely debated in the medical profession, and if ever there was a timely illustration of just how easy it has become to find out what ought to be private information it was provided by the *Sun*. The paper employed a firm that specialises in this kind of investigation to find out what it could from computerised sources about Mr Meacher's affairs. He was the perfect "victim" since he is an ardent campaigner for the new rules on data protection. The results were amazing. Not that the firm found anything to Mr Meacher's discredit, but it did get at a lot of personal information that was his business and nobody else's. The promised action is quite clearly going to come in the nick of time.