Letter from Westminster

Drug costs; unemployment; illness in the Falklands

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The Labour Party committee that is looking at the party's health policy seems to have come down in favour of a limited list of drugs for use by the NHS. Labour is concerned about the escalating cost of the NHS drugs bill, and it does not seem to be particularly reassured by the Government's suggestions that things are coming under control. The committee's report, which will be submitted to the annual conference in September in Blackpool, will argue that it is time that the NHS exerted the undoubted muscle it possesses as a principal customer of the drugs firms to secure a better deal, particularly on prices. It will also urge doctors to make more use of the *British National Formulary* in their prescribing.

The concept of the limited list is politically sensitive, since it could arouse public fears that NHS doctors will be prescribing the second best or yesterday's drug, and it is no part of Labour's plan to send people off to the private sector for treatment. To counteract such a response the move to a limited list would be accompanied by a major publicity campaign. This would make clear that there was no question of patients getting inferior treatment, that the NHS would use the best available drugs, but that it would not necessarily opt for the latest fashion of the pharmaceutical industry.

The report is being based on the work of several smaller study groups; one of these, on pharmaceutical policy, has come up with proposals to boost the role of the community pharmacist. The suggestion is that he should be given greater responsibilities for reporting adverse drug reactions and for keeping records of patients' medication. The overall message will be that there must be a major drive to end inequalities in health care, and that the present "piggybacking off the NHS" by the private sector—which is, Labour would claim, present Government policy—must be ended for good.

Dr Roger Thomas, Labour MP for Carmarthen, a general practitioner, has raised the problem of medical unemployment with Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary. He has challenged him to refute a claim by the recently departed Lord Elton that medical unemployment was a spectre, not a reality (17 April, p 1206). "It is now probably true that the unemployment figures for doctors are mounting to well over the 1300 to 1400 mark, as more young doctors fail to find posts that are suitable for their three-year vocational training and many doctors who have completed it find they are unable to obtain a post of any permanency in general practice," Dr Thomas claimed.

He said that Lord Elton probably did not realise how many doctors without a post did not bother to register as unemployed and found work instead as locum tenens. He also told Mr Fowler that there were reports of vocationally trained doctors having to apply for scores of vacancies before being successful in finding a place in general practice. Even then they were at the mercy of

their new employers because they were often given short-term contracts. "It is said that those who are coloured and qualified overseas, who have wide experience, are being turned down or fail to secure reasonably secure posts," he added. "They keep on applying, but their morale is getting lower all the time."

Dr Thomas described the position as "highly unsatisfactory" and complained that Lord Elton's usefulness in his job was of great doubt since he was obviously unacquainted with the problem. I don't somehow think that that was why Lord Elton was moved in the recent reshuffle. By all reports he had done a good job with the Mental Health (Amendment) Bill in the Lords.

Illness in the Falklands

It is impossible to ignore the crisis in the Falkland Islands in a letter like this, since everything at Westminster seems to revolve around it these days. For those of us who have had to write about the islands, about which—like most people—we knew little, the Government has provided a background paper setting out their history, economy, and social conditions. I pass on the following information to any doctors who might harbour thoughts of one day practising there. It might help to know that the commoner ailments suffered by the Falklanders are the common cold, nasopharyngitis, bronchitis, gastroenteritis, and chronic rheumatism. Their needs are catered for by the Government medical department, which is responsible for public health and sanitation and has a senior medical officer, two medical officers, a dental officer, and 10 nursing staff—a matron, three sisters, and six staff nurses.

There is a 27-bed Government hospital in Port Stanley, which provides medical, surgical, obstetric, and geriatric care, and the islands have a flying doctor service for outlying settlements. A ship is also available to the medical department for home visits. Estimated expenditure by the medical department for 1981-2 was £269 772, which compares with £184 284 in 1977-8. The 1980 census put the population at 1813, of whom 1360 were born in the islands and 302 in Britain.

Among the written answers this week was one of those pieces of information that proves that the Social Services Committee, chaired by Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, is surely an industrious body. Mr John Biffen, Leader of the House, was asked how much evidence the 14 departmental select committees—each one "shadows" the work of a particular ministry—had taken over the year ending 31 March. It came as no surprise that top of the list, with 1474 published pages of evidence, was Mrs Short's committee—and it was well ahead of the others into the bargain. Next came the Treasury and Civil Service Committee—1083 pages—followed by the Energy Committee—1012 pages. Mrs Short's lot even managed to hear more in fewer sittings, having met 43 times compared with 60 by the Treasury Committee and 46 by the Energy Committee. Whatever people think about the various Short reports, it is clear that the committee has listened to a lot of opinions.