Letter from Westminster

Softly, softly approach on lead in petrol

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The pressure on the Government to reconsider its policy on lead in petrol seems to be growing, and the second thoughts disclosed by Professor Michael Rutter at the recent symposium held by the Campaign for Lead Free Air (CLEAR) (22 May, p 1506) are likely to have some influence. Professor Rutter was, after all, a member of the Department of Health and Social Security working party, chaired by Professor Patrick Lawther, whose report is the basis for present Government policy. Professor Rutter told the symposium that the reduction in lead content announced by the Government—the aim is to reduce it from 0.40 grams a litre to 0.15 grams a litre by the end of 1985—was an unacceptable compromise, and suggested that the removal of lead from petrol would have a quite substantial effect in reducing lead pollution. Ministers at the Department of the Environment, which has been foremost in this particular matter, are certainly having another look at the problem, and they do accept that since Lawther reported there has been a lot of conflicting evidence. It seems that a report on lead pollution due from the Medical Research Council in September could play a crucial part in any change of policy. The trouble is that a total ban on lead in petrol would be difficult to enforce because it would make most of the cars on our roads useless.

The reports that ministers are up to something have prompted Labour's health spokesman, Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, to table questions asking what is happening. It is not yet Labour Party policy to ban lead in petrol, but she is in no doubt that given the proved health hazards to children from lead that it eventually will be.

Meanwhile Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, has decided that the BMA's evidence to the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution reinforces the Government's view about what was done in the light of Lawther. "We announced a programme in May last year, and nothing in this report reduces our confidence in the desirability of that programme," he said in a written Commons reply. Mr Clarke said that the BMA report had made plain that petrol was only one of several sources of lead in the environment, and he understood Professor Rutter had emphasised this. "The Government agrees on the importance of these other sources, including lead contaminated food and tap water, industrial emissions, lead-based paint, and special exposure such as employment in a trade using lead," he added. "We are taking steps to reduce lead in the environment along the lines announced a year ago." Ministerial replies always bear textual study, and Mr Clarke's reaction to Professor Rutter's summing up at the CLEAR symposium is carefully phrased. He pointed out that it was a personal view that it would be prudent to remove lead entirely from petrol, which Professor Rutter had expressed. "He, however, acknowledged the uncertainty of the medical evidence on the effects of very low levels of lead in the body," Mr Clarke

added. "We have all along taken the view that, although the evidence is uncertain, action is necessary to reduce people's exposure to lead derived from petrol." In fact it was one of those cases where he didn't say yes, and he didn't say no to change. The existing programme may be desirable, and even if confidence in it is not shaken, that is not to say it cannot be improved—and that may very well happen.

Charging overseas visitors

The Government's plans to charge overseas visitors for using the NHS—thus, it is hoped, raising an extra £6m—have come in for a lot of criticism. The charges have been that this sum was not worth the administrative problems collecting it would cause, let alone the risk of racial discrimination that the new rules aimed at eliminating abuse would create. The decision to impose charges has got a little out of proportion for various reasons. It was essentially aimed at placating a certain element of Conservative backbench opinion. The point is that it provided ready material for a good party political row, and for the ethnic groups to exploit for other ends. The Government has, of course, insisted that it meant no harm, was only improving procedures already potentially racially discriminatory, and that any sum, no matter how small (and £6m is quite large) was welcome. The Home Affairs Select Committee has now come to the Government's aid with a report that says that if the new scheme to check eligibility works it could represent "a positive step forward for race relations." The committee makes clear, however, that it wants certain safeguards written into the proposed system of checks, and that there must be consultation with ethnic minority representatives over the manual of guidance to be issued to admissions staff.

The committee's findings are likely to give some comfort to ministers, which they will use as the occasion demands. It has to be said, however, that it is a majority report. The Labour MPs on the committee backed a version proposed by Mr Alex Lyon, MP for York, which concluded that the realistic assumption of racial discrimination was not worth the savings and mentioned that they had received a great deal of evidence that the Government's original scheme would have led to added racial harassment or the fear of such harassment.

The report does, however, still make clear that several health authorities had their doubts. The West Midlands, for instance, argued that changes in the identification procedure might discourage from attending for treatment those very women from ethnic minority groups who might most benefit from NHS services, thereby possibly worsening the already high perinatal mortality rates. Brent Health District thought the effect could be disastrous for community relations in an area like its own, and Leicestershire AHA was concerned that because of the pressure on admissions staff in busy hospitals the questioning would not always be done thoroughly. It suggested there would be inevitable results when patients were all too obviously of non-European racial origin.