Letter from Westminster

Crisis in postgraduate institutions

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A fierce parliamentary campaign against the effect the Government's decision that overseas students must pay full fees could have on London's 13 postgraduate medical institutions has been launched by MPs from both sides of the House. The prospect is that many of the institutions will have to close if something is not done to alter the impact of the Government's decision to cut their grant on the basis of the number of whole-time registered overseas students. The MPs, who have tabled a Commons motion calling on the Government to think again, will be meeting Dr Gerard Vaughan, the Health Minister, and Dr Rhodes Boyson, the junior Education Minister and a former headmaster, to argue the case for a change of heart. Mr Jack Ashley, Labour MP for Stoke on Trent, warned at a meeting in the Commons of representatives of the institutions affected that they could shortly be watching their death throes if nothing was done. "That would be a disaster for the disabled and would certainly kill research as we have known it in the past," he added. "It would destroy centres of excellence and must be fought very strongly indeed."

By coincidence that same day Lord Annan, Vice-chancellor of London University, was warning the Commons Select Committee on the Social Services about the same subject. He said that the institutes would be losing between 40% and 65% of their income as a result of the Government's policy and they could not continue if that happened. If the money was not there they would close. He claimed that, unlike the London School of Economics, they could not simply get the money by taking more students at realistic fees. LSE has, apparently, saved the day by increasing its student numbers. The problem is that in science the costs are too high. The economic cost each year for a student at one of the institutes is anything between £10 000 and £14 000.

Lord Annan said it was perfectly reasonable to have a discriminatory fee for foreign students, but where he parted company with the Government was over its approach. "I think they have overdone it," he said. "As I understand it, they are keen that the universities should be susceptible to market pressures and realise they have to compete in the world. We would be willing to compete with America, Canada, or Australia, but the fees their universities charge are now way below the fee which has been deducted from our grant." Among the matters being considered by the university is whether the postgraduate institutes might leave their present premises and move in with some of the larger hospitals. Lord Annan was fairly scathing about the fact that he felt people were "working in cupboards" at some of them, and were often "vilely housed." So far as the institutions are concerned, not all of them would object to being shifted, but they do not want to go without taking a large enough dowry to ensure their continued independence. The prospect, otherwise, is of being swallowed up by the hospital to which they are moved. On the whole they would not demur with Mr David Ennals, the former Health Minister, who declared: "Excellence can survive in a cupboard."

Asked by Mr Nicholas Winterton, Conservative MP for Macclesfield, where the money was to be found, Lord Annan said that that was a more appropriate question for Mr Patrick Jenkin, Social Services Secretary. But if the Treasury was not

going to give any more money to the universities, then he hoped it would be recognised in the block grant that there would be a redistribution to take account of the fact that if they did not get extra money to support the institutions the NHS would, for instance, have to carry the whole burden of the care of patients at Hammersmith. He said that the Royal Postgraduate Medical School there and the London School of Hygiene both faced a cut of 24% in income this year, and the British Postgraduate Medical Institution a cut of 17% or just over £2m.

Lord Annan said that by giving the institutes the great bulk of the money given by the Government to London—about £2.1m out of £3m—and by transferring funds from the medical to the non-medical side within the university's resources they had been saved for this year. He admitted, however, to the chairman, Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, that it was a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul and that it would mean trouble for Peter next year.

The things people say in doctors' waiting rooms can have all sorts of repercussions, judging by the following tale. Mr Jeff Rooker, Labour MP for Birmingham, Perry Barr, and a shadow spokesman on social security, was asked to look into whether doctors could refuse to give people claiming National Insurance sickness benefit their "panel notes" to show employers before sending them to the DHSS. The case he looked into concerned a doctor who had sent the panel note to the DHSS himself, thus forcing the patient to purchase a sick note from him to give to the employer. Last December he raised the issue in a Commons question and was told by Mrs Lynda Chalker, junior Social Services Minister, that under the Social Security regulations introduced in 1976 it had always been the intention and was invariably the practice that the notes should be issued by the family practitioner to the patient or his personal representative, and not sent direct to the DHSS.

So far, so good: Mr Rooker then decided that this meant there was no need for anyone to have to purchase a separate note from a doctor and advised his constituents accordingly. He wrote to Birmingham Family Practitioner Committee and was told that GPs in Birmingham were, in general, doing as Mrs Chalker had said. But, the letter went on, it would appear that a doctor's terms of service with the FPC differed from the regulations in that he was required to issue a form "for" his patient, not "to" his patient. In these circumstances, the administrator, Mr T Brown, said he would not agree with Mr Rooker's conclusions.

Mr Rooker bounced the matter straight back to the DHSS, this time getting a reply from the Social Security Minister, Mr Hugh Rossi, admitting doubt about the legal position concerning a doctor's obligation to provide patients with medical certificates because of the wording of the terms of service.

"While it has always been the intention that doctors should give certificates for social security purposes to their patients, or in appropriate circumstances to another person such as a relative, and this is the normal practice, we cannot at present exclude entirely the possibility that some doctors might be within the law as it stands at present should they decide to send medical certificates directly to the local office of the Department," Mr Rossi added. So there are to be discussions with the profession about an amendment to the terms of service which will put the matter beyond doubt.