Letter from Westminster

Dr Vaughan's enthusiasms

WILLIAM RUSSELL

One of Dr Gerard Vaughan's enthusiasms is to see something done to stop women being treated like cattle in antenatal clinics and he has given his support to pressure groups, including the Maternity Alliance, chaired by the former Labour MP, Mrs Helene Hayman, who made parliamentary history by nursing her baby in the Commons. The pressure groups have been complaining about the impersonal and unpleasant treatment often meted out to women at such clinics. The Health Minister is having talks with midwives' representatives and with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists about ways of improving matters. He believes that most of the remedies would cost very little. "This is a matter of attitude," he says. "What is needed is more consideration and courtesy and a little understanding of just how anxious women who go to these clinics are." He is particularly concerned that quite a lot of women go once to the clinic and dislike it so much that they refuse to go back. He wants more use made of appointments and more thought put into the way the reception and examination areas are laid out. In one clinic he visited recently consultations in cubicles may have been out of sight but they were not out of earshot.

"I believe the successful clinics are the ones where a real effort is made by the people in charge to treat the mothers as human beings, and where fathers and relatives can come and go as a matter of course," he adds. "They are the places where the nurses and doctors and the receptionists make it their business to ensure that mothers are made really welcome and know what is going on at all stages."

Dr Vaughan is also much concerned about the need to extend the scope of general practitioner care, particularly to enable GPs to carry out minor surgery, and he has been having talks with the profession recently. He has, apparently, found a willing ally in Dr John Ball, chairman of the General Medical Services Committee. The consultants, however, are quite another matter. The way Dr Vaughan sees it is that health authorities could loan the necessary equipment to GPs for use in their surgeries and health centres, and if that was agreed and proved a useful plan then the next step would be for the health authorities to contract work out to GPs. In due course GPs might be able to work in hospitals on a sessional basis, and the number of GP beds, currently underused, could be increased. Dr Vaughan believes that the younger GPs would welcome the chance to take on more surgical work though there is little prospect at the moment of the DHSS agreeing to payments. The resistance to change of this kind, he has discovered, comes from the older GP, who likes things as they are.

He is convinced that there is a lot of skill going to waste because the opportunity to use it is not there and that many GPs are just as well if not better qualified to undertake minor surgical work than some junior doctors in casualty units. Apart from the obvious benefits from increased job satisfaction for GPs, there

are more mundane—perhaps the word is really commercial—considerations in his mind. One is that if GPs did such minor surgery it would cut queues and waiting time in casualty and outpatient departments. The DHSS reckons that the cost of each new outpatient at 1978-9 prices is £59, and if each outpatient was to attend on average one session less the overall savings might be as much as £65m a year.

As expected, Lord Nugent of Guildford, who is president of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, has tabled a new clause to the Transport Bill making the wearing of seat belts compulsory. He has all-party backing, the clause's other sponsors being Lord Hill of Luton, Lord Porritt, both of whom have impeccable BMA antecedents, and Lord Underhill, the Labour Party's former national agent. The general consensus is that the Lords will duly amend the Bill to include the new clause, and that when it returns to the Commons later this summer—there is to be a free vote—the change will be allowed to stand. The health ministers will all back it. There was some evidence of the financial benefits of making wearing seat belts in the front seats of cars compulsory in a recent answer by Sir George Young, the junior DHSS minister, to Mr Arthur Lewis Labour MP for Newham North West. This showed that all road accidents, at November 1979 prices, cost £75m, of which accidents to front-seat car occupants not wearing seat belts was £18m.

No surprises on either side

No surprises in the report from the Doctors' and Dentists' Review Body and no surprises either in the Government's reaction to it. The simple truth is that ministers are determined to avoid agreeing to anything on pay which would upset their anti-inflation policy. It also looks as if, given this latest failure to implement the findings of the independent pay review bodies, the Government believes that the time has come to take a fresh look at the whole system of deciding on pay increases for "Top People," MPs, armed Forces, and doctors. It has, for example, already taken the pay of the heads of nationalised industries away from the Top Salaries Review Body and handed it over to the ministers concerned in each case. The Top Salaries Review Body report leaves no doubt that it is fed up with having its advice ignored. This latest report is only an interim one and recommends that the Government should implement in full the proposals made a year ago. It adds cuttingly that its credibility as a review body depends on the Government's willingness to accept that its recommendations would normally be implemented.

The DDRB has not taken quite the same line, but the report makes quite clear that the recommendations put forward are believed to be right at the time and do take account of the economic circumstances affecting the nation generally—and the prevailing economic circumstances are, of course, the Government's eternal excuse for not implementing such reports in full.