Letter from Westminster

Continuous search for more cash

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The BMA's reservations—expressed at its Brighton meeting—about hotel charges, lotteries, and voluntary fund raising as means of getting extra cash for the NHS have pleased Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, Labour's health spokesman. "I am glad they have had enough common sense to understand that the hotel charges scheme is unworkable," she told me. "I only hope the same degree of common sense will prevail in the Department of Health and Social Security, where they are moving towards some form of two-tier system." Mrs Dunwoody was not, however, pleased that the BMA had opted for further exploration of health insurance schemes as a means of funding NHS treatment. The Executive Committee of the BMA's Council has looked at insurance-based systems in Holland, Germany, and France, where compulsory sickness insurance covers the bulk of the population, though it has more work to do on costings before any approaches are made to ministers. The risk, of course, is that coming up with a workable scheme could give the Government a chance to take away with the left hand what it is giving with the right by cutting the amount of money it gives to health, and nobody wants that. Mrs Dunwoody's opposition to insurance funding is implacable, and she has her own study of its defects under way. "Britain already has an insurance-based scheme," she said. "If you were to take the employers' surcharge and give that to the NHS that would have some direct effect on funding." As for the schemes that Dr Gerard Vaughan, the Health Minister, keeps hinting are only just around the corner, Mrs Dunwoody said that she did not mind what schemes he looked at but at the end of the day he really ought to take on board the fact that the NHS was the best way of providing and funding health care.

In fact, nothing much is happening at the DHSS on insurance funding. Schemes are being looked at but action is very much in the future. One rather-more-to-the-point-than-usual civil servant summed up the position thus. "If you asked Dr Vaughan about it he would give an impression of a fair degree of haste," he said. "The S of S, however, would leave you with quite a different impression." Dr Vaughan's next opportunity to stir things up, free from the tutelage of his officials, will probably not come until the Conservative Conference in Blackpool in the autumn, when no doubt his very own platform, the Conservative Medical Society, will afford him the opportunity.

With the Government getting ready to start looking at ways of cutting public expenditure, and the Prime Minister's stated view that it has gone about as far as it can go, it looks as if one hitherto sacred cow is about to be given a very thorough going over indeed. I was told by one official that he has "a tingling at the finger tips" about health charges being on the agenda of the Public Expenditure Scrutiny Committee, more widely known as PESC, this autumn.

Baroness Young, the Education Minister of State, who sometimes handles health matters in the Lords, was being a little more forthcoming the other day about the Government's second look at how to charge overseas visitors who use the NHS. She told Lord Avebury, the Liberal peer, probably still best known as Mr Eric Lubbock, that the working party that will examine the Government's proposals would be chaired by a DHSS official and would consist mainly of NHS representatives from various disciplines. "We shall also invite the medical profession, the Commission for Racial Equality, and the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants to participate," she added. Lord Wallace of Coslany, a Labour peer, told her that he had received representations from hospital staffs who found it extremely embarrassing at present trying to test doubtful cases vigorously, and asked what evidence the Government had of wholesale abuse of the NHS to justify its action. Lady Young dodged the latter part, since evidence is one thing it does not have, and insisted that the new proposals to be looked at by the working party should reduce the sort of incidents that had occurred in the past when what to do had been left largely to local discretion. She said the "good Samaritan" approach still held good, and assured the House that the new regulations would not be laid until November.

Agreement between Dr Vaughan and Mrs Dunwoody is rare enough to merit recording, and they were united in condemning a proposed EEC directive on parallel importing of proprietary medicines brought before the Commons with a Government recommendation to take no action. Parallel importing is what happens when an entrepreneur buys a proprietary medicine in one country where the price is low and sells it in another European country at a higher price, a piece of enterprise that benefits neither manufacturer nor patient. The importer, however, needs a licence, to get which he has to be given information, often confidential, by the manufacturer. The EEC directive would have removed that barrier. Dr Vaughan, opposing it on behalf of the Government, said that there ought to be tighter controls on importers, who, for example, should not be allowed to break up batches of medicines and should have a proper system to trace and recall any suspected of being faulty.

Such "pirating," he said, was damaging to the pharmaceutical industry and the directive would be dangerous to introduce. Mrs Dunwoody said it was a bad directive, and that nothing should be done until progress had been made on price structures and harmonisation of manufacturing standards within the EEC. She made the obvious point, of course, that it was amusing to find a Government that makes "a god of the entrepreneur" suddenly saying it was not right for people to make a profit against British businessmen. The authentic attitude of the average Briton faced with what begins at Calais was struck by Sir Anthony Meyer, Conservative MP for West Flint. "I wish the best of luck to anyone who can make it easier to buy decent British medicines on the Continent," he said. "When I go there, I invariably have to get a prescription to buy a disgusting mixture that does nothing to cure my ailments."