Letter from Westminster

Griffiths inquiry into NHS efficiency

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The ranks of the great and the good are not all that large—just consider how often the same names come up to chair that inquiry or this committee—so Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, is understandably pleased to have found a new addition to the list. He is Mr Roy Griffiths, deputy chairman and managing director of Sainsbury's, who has agreed to chair the team of four businessmen who will carry out an inquiry into the effective use and management of manpower and related resources in the National Health Service (12 February, p 578).

He has not been asked to produce a report, and nothing will be published at the end of the day. Mr Fowler wants him and his colleagues to take a fairly detailed look at the whole of the NHS and the way that resources are being used. He wants the result of the inquiry by the end of June, when he expects suggestions about what areas of the NHS the government should look at more closely to see if there are further initiatives that could be taken to promote efficiency. Mr Griffiths will not be paid and will be working part time. The way it was described was—four days a week for Sainsbury's, four days a week for the Department of Health and Social Security. Mr Griffiths, it seems, is that kind of man. His remit does not include the family practitioner services but will cover hospital and community health services.

Social Democrats want to integrate FPCs

The Social Democrats' health policy is now in place, having been ratified at the party's policymaking council in Newcastle upon Tyne last month. It went through pretty much as proposed in the draft presented to the party's assembly in October in Cardiff by Mr Mike Thomas, their health spokesman. The section on primary care was, however, altered. As well as promising that primary care will be expanded and that this will be done in conjunction with attempts to overcome some of its problems, including experiments with incentives for general practice in deprived areas, it now says that the Social Democrats will integrate the family practitioner services into the mainstream of the NHS. Proposing the change, Dr John Oldham (Tameside), a general practitioner, said that if the party wanted to strengthen the NHS it would do it by unifying the system, not by sustaining existing divisions. If it wanted community nurses, health visitors, midwives, and doctors to work together it was better to put them under one umbrella, he said. As a general practitioner he did not see what was proposed clashing in any way with independent status. He also warned that at present Britain was heading for a first and second class health system.

The government is standing firm on its plan to take power to appoint both the chairmen and vice-chairmen of family practitioner committees. Lord Trefgarne, the junior Health Minister, seemed to be hinting at a change of heart when the Health and Social Services and Social Security Adjudications Bill returned

to the Lords, as he promised that he would have a look at the plan. He had come up against considerable criticism from peers, led by Lord Kilmarnock, a Social Democrat, who doubted the claim that the appointment powers were needed to ensure a balance between contractors and non-contractors in the two jobs. Lord Kilmarnock claimed that the family practitioner committees had maintained such a balance since 1974, and quoted from a letter from Dr John Ball, chairman of the General Medical Services Committee, saying that it could see no justification for the change. Lord Kilmarnock said that he had the backing not only of the National Association of Health Authorities in England and Wales, which, he admitted, might be thought of as an interested body, but also of the BMA.

Under the Bill family practitioner committees will become full independent health authorities, a proposal which has been strongly opposed by Labour. When the Bill returned for its final stages in the Lords last week Lord Trefgarne had made up his mind. He was not changing it. An amendment was moved by Lord Winstanley, the Liberal peer who is a general practitioner, to leave the power of appointment of vice-chairman within the jurisdiction of the family practitioner committee, with the proviso that it must appoint a contractor where the chairman was a non-contractor, and vice versa. Lord Winstanley repeated that many medical organisations, such as the General Medical Services Committee of the BMA, had objected to the change because they thought that the existing practice should continue. Given that they were going to lose the right to appoint chairmen, they thought that family practitioner committees should at least retain the right to appoint the deputies.

But he went on to show that those who lobby do so at their peril, should their information be less than wholly accurate. He said that those who opposed the change had been under the impression that the existing practice of family practitioner committees which appointed their own chairman was to ensure that a chairman was a contractor and the vice-chairman a non-contractor, or the other way round. "We were wrongly informed by the General Medical Services Committee and by others that the existing practice is always to make sure that one is a contractor and the other a non-contractor," he said. "In so far as I may have misled the House, we are very sorry."

Lord Trefgarne, who had also been looking into the practice of family practitioner committees, said he had discovered that nigh on 20% had a chairman and a vice-chairman of "the same persuasion," a position that the government regarded as being unsatisfactory. As for the amendment proposed by Lord Winstanley, he said that as drafted it would admit the possibility of any person in contract with the NHS—a caterer, for example, or a refuse collector—being appointed as vice-chairman where the chairman was a non-contractor. He remained convinced that the government's approach was the right one, and it had the advantage of making it possible when a potential chairman had been identified of ensuring that he got further experience by serving a spell as vice-chairman of a family practitioner committee. Lord Winstanley, therefore, withdrew his amendment. The Bill has now gone to the Commons.