Letter from Westminster

Battle success for Mr Fowler

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's autumn statement provided for growth of 1% for the hospital and community health services in 1984-5 and, although it does not say so, the same for the following two years. For that news, however, we must await the budget in the spring. Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, does seem to have won a major battle in this year's public spending round. He said after the statement that the government's pledges on the National Health Service had been honoured, and that next year it planned to spend £800m more on the NHS in Great Britain. "These resources should provide real growth of over 1% for the NHS," he added. "In the hospital and community health services the growth should cover the expected increase in the number of very old people. We are already treating more patients than ever before, and these extra resources will enable us to treat still more patients in the future."

These words are apparently carefully chosen, and it is from them that we can make the deductions about the remaining two years. It should mean, as well as more elderly people being looked after, that the capital spending programme will continue to grow and the family practitioner services as well. Ministers are also convinced that they have at least got across to their colleagues that the search for public spending cuts cannot in future be directed at the NHS. They are doing their part, with their attempts to improve efficiency, to get value for money. But the search for cuts must be directed elsewhere, with the defence budget clearly a primary target.

It has been a hard fight. There were times when depression was said to have set in, which the outcome has not justified. Oddly enough, the great row over the summer's manpower cuts helped. Suddenly people woke up to the fact that those generalisations about there being thousands underemployed in the NHS was self evidently not the case. So perhaps one of these days Mr Fowler and Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, can look forward to being cheered wherever they go rather than shouted down. That will be the day.

Binder Hamlyn before Christmas

So far as the family practitioner services are concerned, Mr Fowler said that the government was budgeting for an increase in public expenditure on these services of some £190m next year, after taking account of this year's increase of some £100m over the 1983 White Paper plan. "This brings the planned total for 1984-5 to some £2.86 billion for England," he said. "We are discussing with representatives of the industry the scope for further savings on the drugs bill next year." Just what savings he has in mind we will have to wait

and see, but they will not be anything like those Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody used to predict, which ministers reckon were, at times, about as much as the whole of the British drugs industry made in profits. But promotional costs will be looked at, which is bad news for those who rely on drug advertising. The Binder Hamlyn report on forecasting and control of family practitioner spending should be published before Christmas, and consultations will follow.

There seems every chance that there will be a Social Security Bill this session, and that it will be wide enough to have a health section to allow ministers to give independent status to family practitioner committees. They believe that it will be welcomed by the medical profession, and, while the deal has still to be signed on parliamentary time, the omens are good. As to whether family practitioner committees will be under the supervisory board proposed by the Griffiths report, it looks as if they will, but Binder Hamlyn must come before a decision is finally taken. Griffiths concentrated on the hospital services but recognised that the family practitioner services played a most important role and said: "There is a clear need for these issues to be brought within the scope of the coherent management process we are now proposing." As to who should sit on the board, no decision on Griffiths's proposed list has been taken. He did not, much to the rage of the Royal College of Nursing, include the chief nursing officer, but that does not mean that any final decision has been taken, and it does look as if olive branches are about to be extended in the nurses' direction. They were the first profession to react to Griffiths, possibly to overreact. Anyway, ministers are sympathetic, it is said. The consultation on Griffiths is not intended to go on for ever, and action this session seems to be what is wanted.

Mr Fowler's first step has been to announce Mr Griffiths's appointment to the supervisory board.

Social Services Select Committee

The membership of the Social Services Select Committee for the current session has now been decided. Three of last year's members are back on the list—Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, who was chairman and should be again, Mr Ron Lewis, Labour MP for Carlisle, and Mr Nicholas Winterton, Conservative MP for Macclesfield. The six others are new—Mr David Crouch, Conservative MP for Canterbury, Sir David Price, Conservative MP for Eastleigh, Mrs Edwina Currie, Conservative MP for Derbyshire South, Mr Roy Galley, Conservative MP for Halifax North, Mr Tony Lloyd, Labour MP for Stretford, and Mr Michael Meadowcroft, Liberal MP for Leeds West, the Liberals' health spokesman. It would be fair to say that the old committee had its passengers, so it will be interesting to see how the new lot make out. Mrs Currie is a forceful lady, Mr Crouch is experienced in health matters, and Mr Meadowcroft is one of the Liberals' thinkers.