Letter from Westminster

Ministerial thoughts on "a beefed-up HAS"

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The possibility of some kind of independent inspectorate being set up for the NHS was held out by Mr Patrick Jenkin, Social Services Secretary, when he attended the Social Affairs Select Committee. He had been summoned to give evidence on perinatal and neonatal mortality, the topic the committee is investigating at present. But such occasions do allow a minister to fly a few kites. On the idea of an independent inspectorate, he refused to go much further than to say he was sympathetic to the concept of an independent monitoring agency along the lines of "a beefed-up Health Advisory Service." Mr Jenkin said he hesitated to use the word inspectorate but saw no reason why over the years a more effective monitoring service should not be developed. "We will want to carry this forward in the light of our consultations, possibly on an experimental basis in one region," he added. The proposal is said to be still in the hypothetical stage. "Very unfirm" and "nebulous" were two of the epithets applied to it later. But how it is all to be done has not been worked out.

Mr Jenkin also told the committee that so far he had not taken a different attitude from his predecessor, Mr David Ennals, on priorities for the NHS but that he would be publishing updated guidance later this year. He did not rise to the bait when the committee chairman, Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, tried to get him to concede that tackling perinatal and neonatal mortality will be one of his priorities. The problem had to be looked at against the background of resources for the NHS as a whole, he said. He was confronted all the time with demands from this and that interest—the NHS did not want for objectives on which to spend more money. "My view is that perinatal and neonatal services must have a high priority in the sense that this does represent the way to save life by avoiding lifelong serious handicap," he said. "There is some evidence this actually may be represented as having a substantial benefit in cost terms quite apart from the obvious human moral issues involved."

More consultant posts

Mr Jenkin also told the committee that the Chief Medical Officer would be approaching the medical profession shortly to discuss the provision of more consultant posts in the NHS. It was his view, he said, that there should be more such posts because a career structure which left doctors in so-called training grades for the whole of their professional career with no prospect of gaining a consultancy was wrong.

At one point he was questioned by Mr Ron Lewis, Labour MP for Carlisle, who is opposed to the demon drink, about the effect of alcohol on pregnant women. Everything should be done to try to encourage pregnant mothers to drink in moderation and not to smoke, Mr Jenkin said. But this was a free country

and the decision in the last resort was one for free women. A lot, however, could be done by education and that was something he would discuss with the Health Education Council. But the one thing that did seem to stop people consuming alcohol was price—he had not seen any substantive evidence to challenge that. "This is clearly a factor ministers have to bear in mind," he said. "No doubt the Chancellor has to bear it in mind—and I drew his attention to it the other day—when fixing the level of duty in the Budget."

Too much party politics in AHAs

The Health Services Bill is now well into its committee stage, with the Government's reorganisation proposals coming under some pretty cool scrutiny from their own MPs as well as Labour MPs. Conservative backbenchers, remembering the mess their Government made last time round, seem determined to see that it will not happen again—at least by default.

During a discussion about the composition of the new district authorities, Dr Gerard Vaughan, the Health Minister, promised that the Government would take whatever steps it could to reduce party political nominees on the authorities. "We must avoid political packing," he said. "There are today too many authorities in the NHS which have too much party politics. There are clear party divisions which I deplore. Party politics should not be involved in health matters."

On the size of the new authorities, Dr Vaughan said that the Royal Commission had rightly pointed out that some of the existing ones were too big. "The largest at present has 33 members," he said. "We think that more than 20 members would be unwieldy, quite apart from the difficulties of getting a larger number of suitable members." On the question of local authority representation, he said that the Government had concluded there should be no more than four. They thought this sufficient and it would also mean that the members would turn up, since one of the problems was finding local authority representatives with the time and opportunity to do both jobs.

Lots of things are said in Parliament that never get reported. The reason is that they simply do not add up to news, no matter how interesting they may be in their own right. It was, for instance, fascinating to realise that Dr Cameron is alive and well and living in the Commons. Certainly the following homily could quite easily have been addressed to the long-suffering Dr Finlay across the porridge at Tannochbrae.

"I am amazed, as a doctor who qualified 30 years ago, to recall how much one could do then oneself but now delegates to others. While I appreciate that the technicians are well trained and that radiographers and pathologists help individuals, I wonder whether the time has not come when the pendulum should start swinging back—when doctors should be taking more upon themselves and relying less upon others—and whether we are looking on the NHS as a bottomless pool with the doctor at the head of the pyramid doing less and less and contributing less than he should."

The sage was actually Dr Roger Thomas, Labour MP for Carmarthen, during a debate in the committee on the Health Services Bill.

Comments to him—not to me. But surely a remark worth putting before a wider audience?