Cure or care: where do we go from here?

BRIAN LEWIS

In a remarkably honest letter to the BMA, the Secretary of State said: "Public expectations of the Health and Social Services will frequently outrun supply" (21 January, p 189). He ended by saying "Resources do not meet all needs, and I shall not stop saying so." Most doctors have known this for some time, but it can do no harm if politicians and the profession recognise the fact and then together set about trying to do their best with what is available.

The consultative document, *Priorities for Health and Social Services in England*, and now *The Way Forward*¹ seek to change priorities from curing on the acute side of medicine to caring for the chronic side. In effect, what has happened is that we have gradually reduced the quality of care in both sectors to an unacceptable level, certainly for those exposed to it, in order to keep up the quantity of work done. Yet even this has failed and there are more than half a million people on waiting lists, predominantly for surgery, in many cases for an unacceptable time, and often in misery.

No one doubts that we must devote more money and resources for the care of the mentally ill, the handicapped, the indigent, and the old. No one who has visited some of our long-stay hospitals for these groups could deny this. But at a time when we are working within cash limits, and these are set so that inflation is actually cutting back the real amount we have to spend, this can only be achieved by killing Peter to save Paul. The biggest users of the acute services are the elderly, one of the priority groups we are seeking to protect. Joint replacements, prostatectomies, prolapses, and cataracts are not common in the young. Yet any cutback in the acute services will increase the waiting time, often to years, for those with least years to spare—rendering them in need of care when cure was possible.

This is where *The Way Forward* ducks the real issues. The caring side must have more, but the acute side must also be improved. Without more new money you cannot do both. Where will this extra money come from? Cut back on administration, the drug bill, and increase the social services is the cry. Yet our administrative and pharmaceutical costs are among the lowest in Europe, and under close scrutiny by the Government and the profession. Paradoxically much of the planning envisaged by Mr Ennals will increase the cost of administration, or not get done at all. Pressure on the rates and the rate support grant are likely to make the social services's position even more acute than the NHS's. If realistic sums cannot be saved, can they be found from Central Government sources? Presumably the Cabinet thinks not or it would have done so already.

Improper suggestion?

In its evidence to the Royal Commission the BMA suggested charges to patients, a concept

which an election-conscious Government rejects. Yet Section 64 of the NHS (Consolidation) Act 1977 increases the maximum amount recoverable by hospitals from £16 to £21 per week as a contribution to maintenance by hospital patients going out to paid work. Furthermore, pensions are abated for elderly long-stay patients. Why is it right to charge the old and the handicapped, but wrong to charge those best able to pay, except in terms of dogma or of votes? A recent poll conducted on behalf of the *Daily Mail*² showed that a large majority of the population would be prepared to pay towards better and quicker services. It seems that the public put health care ahead of holidays, betting, and booze, yet their elected leaders do not give them credit for it. Of course, a small and noisy minority will howl "means tests," as if income tax, university grants, and supplementary benefits were based on anything else.

The private sector could make an important contribution, ideally coexisting in NHS hospitals to the advantage of both. As a matter of political reality this is being denied. Could enough private hospitals be built, and where would the capital come from? Industry and the unions could play a part in this; the speedy return to work of key employees could do little to harm the public image or the profitability of industry. Union pension funds would be far better spent providing an important service to their members and earning a realistic rate of interest than in laying down works of art as a hedge against inflation. Manor House Hospital and Benenden Hospital should not be seen as anachronisms but part of "the way forward."

If private and local authority housing can coexist, so can private and public medicine.

The same noisy minority will cry "queue jumping, attracting doctors from the priority areas by the lure of private practice, diverting much needed staff from the NHS." Far from permitting queue jumping, it could in fact reduce queues for all. If the caring sector were properly funded and a work-related contract available to doctors who work in it, it could reverse the flow of manpower. An effective private sector could provide work for a great many nurses and others, particularly married women needing flexible hours and a job near their homes, who are currently unemployed, wasting skills that the State cannot utilise.

These are the alternatives before us: more direct finance from Government, imposition of charges on those who can afford them, private practice, or the collapse of the NHS as we know it altogether. What is needed now is a public debate in which people of all persuasions can discuss credible solutions. For those who are dying on the waiting list the NHS has already collapsed.

References

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- ² *Daily Mail*, 22 November 1977.

South-east Kent Health District

E B LEWIS, MB, FRCGS, consultant anaesthetist

A subconsultant grade in surgery (continued)

81 918 patients was obtained, of whom 58 796 had operations. The 10% rule was then applied to the printout. Urology accounted for 11 925 patients and 8577 operations. To these must be added a large number of diagnostic and check cystoscopies, which being mainly on day patients were ignored by the computer. Arterial surgery (cardiac excluded) amounted to 3763 patients and 2287 operations. For gastroenterology there were 21 373 patients and 11 008 operations, of which 3344 were cholecystectomies, and, strictly speaking, cholecystectomy is a subconsultant operation.

If these three surgical specialties had existed in 1975 it would have reduced the consultant responsibility and work load from 58 796 operations to 21 872. The remaining 36 923 operations would have been classified as general surgery and the work undertaken by the subconsultant grade. Using the figures shown, the ratio of specialist consultant to general subconsultant operations is 1:1.7. Compare this with the HCSA demand that the ratio of consultant to subconsultant ought

to be 1:1.3. By making the distinction consultant/subconsultant coincide with the distinction specialist/general—provided that each type of operation is allotted accordingly, and also provided that the self-respect of the subconsultant grade is supported by full clinical responsibility—such a grade might endure, despite problems in administration and training.

References

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Ledbury, Herefordshire

F S A DORAN, MD, FRCS, lately consulting surgeon, Bromsgrove and Mid-Worcestershire Hospital Group