Letter from Westminster

NHS budget escapes relatively unscathed

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Mr Patrick Jenkin's reward for having been so accommodating about the social service side of his empire in the Cabinet battle over public spending cuts has been that the health budget was allowed to escape relatively unscathed. The NHS did not, of course, emerge unpruned at the end of the day, but at least it was not included in the 2% cut all the other cash-limited central government programmes have to accept. The Government has, however, still to fix the cash limits and it will depend on the allowance made for inflation whether the health authorities will find themselves in trouble again next year. The indications are that they will be subject to broadly the same discipline as local government, where the rate support grant will allow for a 6% annual increase in earnings and for an increase in prices other than pay of 11%. The direct NHS contribution to the cuts is about £25m, which will be found by better use of resources and increased efficiency. Mr Jenkin believes that it can be raised through the elimination of inefficient working practices, energy savings, economies in catering, and more effective drug control. The motto for the NHS is to be: "Practise good housekeeping."

As a result of the measures health authorities' revenue spending will be able to rise by 1½% next year, which is expected to be enough to cover demographic changes—mainly the increasing numbers of old people in the population—as well as to allow a start on some high priority developments. The planned spending on the family practitioner services is also to be maintained. Given that the surgery is of the order of only £25m (though if people try really hard the savings could be greater), how is it to be done? Mr Jenkin's answer is that the growth of spending on the NHS can be maintained by making people pay a bit more through National Insurance contributions. He also believes people are prepared to do just that to get results.

The NHS has escaped the axe because the 1% increase in employees' National Insurance contributions to be introduced in April includes a ½% for health, which will raise an extra £254m. Some of that, if the sums provided are anything to go by, will probably be needed to meet the £121m required to pay for various services which the Government had planned to introduce charges for, such as road accidents and eye tests. But this ½% is regarded by Labour MPs as part of a move to soften up the public's attitude towards paying for treatment through insurance. I think some of the hopes raised recently by Dr Gerard Vaughan, the Health Minister, about a consultative document on insurance funding in the New Year might prove to be a little high. Certainly some people who should have known better were surprised by what he said. The thought of insurance as a supplementary means of raising revenue has its attractions, and Mr Jenkin, who is said to have come round to the idea somewhat, will be making a speech soon setting out the pros and cons.

Abortion and seat belts

Some topics simply refuse to go away at Westminster, even when it seems as if the argument has been settled for the foreseeable future. The annual ballot for private members' Bills has taken place and Mr Tim Sainsbury, Conservative MP for Hove, who came top, has announced he is "seriously considering" amending the 1967 Abortion Act. Last session Mr John Corrie,

Conservative MP for Bute and North Ayrshire, who came top, failed after a bitterly protracted battle to get his attempt through. Mr Sainsbury, however, if he does go ahead, has learned one lesson from last year's debacle. Don't fire at too many targets. He would opt for a one-clause Bill which would ban termination of pregnancy after 22 weeks. He believes there is considerable support for such a measure both in the Commons and among the public.

"There is a very widespread consensus in the medical profession that termination, certainly beyond 24 weeks, runs a real risk of aborting a fetus which could survive and sustain independent life," he said. "I would prefer 22 weeks to allow for the margin of error." The limit is at present 28 weeks, and presumably, given the inevitable opposition, Mr Sainsbury would settle for 24. The point about a one-clause Bill is that, although it can be amended, this can only be done within the scope of what is called its long title—and that, if carefully written, restricts the subjects which can be introduced. Mr Corrie's big mistake was to try to do too much in his Bill. If Mr Sainsbury goes ahead, it will be harder to stop this one making progress.

The other subject coming up again is a Bill making it compulsory to wear seat belts in cars. Lord Nugent of Guildford, a Conservative peer who is also deputy president of RoSPA, has introduced a private members' Bill in the Lords which has the backing of the BMA. It is due to get its second reading on December 15, but whether it gets any further is anybody's guess, though the BMA has written to every peer urging them to back the Bill. The hurdle that Lord Nugent has to overcome is that no previous attempt to make the wearing of seat belts compulsory has managed to get a second reading in the Lords. The situation in the Commons has been different. There the Bills have foundered, after getting substantial endorsement at second reading, during the committee stages once those backbenchers who regard the proposal as an assault on personal freedoms start filibustering.

Lord Nugent's Bill is almost identical to the one introduced in the Commons last year by Mr Neil Carmichael, Labour MP for Glasgow, Kelvingrove, and a former junior Transport Minister, which looked at one point as if it would get through. Lord Nugent is hopeful that he will make progress, though he will not receive tacit support from the Government since the Transport Minister, Mr Norman Fowler, is opposed to compulsion. Lord Nugent believes that making wearing a seat belt compulsory would double the number of road users who wear them, with obvious results so far as accidents are concerned. He points out that all the evidence from other, more enlightened countries is that such legislation does save lives.

Government guidelines for review bodies

Finally, I hear on the Whitehall grapevine that the Government intends to issue new guidelines to the three review bodies for the 1981-2 pay reviews. The Government will draw their attention to the 6% cash limits fixed for local authorities, to the level of pay settlements in the private sector, and to the Government's aim of single-figure percentage increases. How the independent review bodies will react to this "guidance" only time will tell. But I cannot imagine that doctors will be best pleased at Whitehall once again putting a spanner in their pay review machinery.