Health features prominently in the State of the Union address

Terri Rutter, *Boston*

President Clinton, in his annual state of the union address last week, called on Congress to support several healthcare reforms.

He urged Congress to pass a new "bill of rights" to protect consumers of health care. Among the provisions it called for were the rights for patients to be informed about all possible methods of treatment, irrespective of cost, and the rights for patients to be able to choose their doctors.

Noting how rapidly technology had advanced the discovery of genes for diseases, the president also proposed what he called a "gift" to the next millennium—a 21st century research fund "for pathbreaking scientific inquiry." Funding would be awarded to

the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the National Cancer Institute. President Clinton called it the "largest funding increase in history" but did not give any figures.

President Clinton said that measures must be taken to prevent using technology such as genetic testing in ways that adversely affect people, and he called again for a ban on human cloning.

The president also asked Congress to expand Medicare to include people aged 55 to 65 who had lost their insurance benefits and to broaden the Family and Medical Leave Act to grant parents leave from work for their children's medical appointments. Currently the act

allows parents time from work to care for sick children or other family members.

President Clinton also called for environmental measures that he said would have a positive impact on health. Earlier this year, he passed tighter regulations to the Clean Air Act, and in his address he called for a "clean water" initiative—an effort to clean rivers, lakes, and streams. He also proposed \$6bn (£3.75bn) in tax cuts to encourage business and industry to reduce global warming through the production of cleaner factories and fuel efficient cars.

Calling smoking the "gravest health threat" that children face, the president urged Congress to pass legislation to "change the way tobacco companies do business." He called for an increase of \$1.50 on a pack of cigarettes, as well as fines and taxes on the companies if they do not reduce rates of smoking among teenagers. □

Health secretary hits back at charges of bias

John Warden, *London*

After allegations of bias, the government's appointment procedures to NHS trust boards in England have been largely endorsed by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, Sir Leonard Peach.

The Conservative shadow health secretary, John Maples had complained that a disproportionate number of Labour councillors had been nominated on to boards. In response, the health secretary, Frank Dobson released with Sir Leonard's approval the text of his reply, which on the whole endorsed the government's appointment procedures.

But Sir Leonard does want to test the quality of those appointed and has asked his auditors to look at the process by which local authority members were nominated, the competition to which they were exposed, and evidence indicating whether they were chosen on merit.

Labour's election manifesto said that NHS boards would become more representative of the communities they serve. The result was some 1800 nominations from MPs and local authorities. Sir Leonard says that he approved the plan as long as appointments were based on merit. In answer to Mr Maples's complaint that the code of practice had been breached, Sir Leonard states that the evidence suggests otherwise.

On the issue of "political manipulation," the Department of Health admits the error when officials wrote to council leaders inviting nominations for the first round of appointments, and not to the chief executives. Nor did they make it clear that minority parties should be consulted. The procedure was changed for subsequent trawls. To a charge of incompetence in filling appointments on time, Sir Leonard says that the combination of a new government, inexperienced ministers, and the huge number of appointments to be filled within six or seven months of an election had put a substantial extra strain on the system. □

France has more early deaths than Britain

Jacqui Wise, *BMJ*

In France premature male mortality from lung cancer, which 20 years ago was half the British rate, was about 40% higher than in Britain by 1994.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that deaths from lung cancer before the age of 65 have steadily declined in Britain over recent years owing to a change in smoking patterns. The female rate remains far lower in France than in Britain, but it has doubled in 20 years.

A comparison of the two countries shows that France has high early mortality compared with Britain. Premature deaths from alcoholism and cirrhosis have fallen in France over the past 20 years but are still one of the main causes of premature death for men. Male mortality from this cause in Britain has risen over the past 15 years, and yet the rate in France is still three times higher. The rates for women are also higher in France than in Britain, but for both

Lung cancer deaths in people aged under 65

countries these are lower than the rates for men.

The main cause of premature male deaths in Britain is heart disease, despite the significant decrease in mortality from this cause. In Britain there were 70.8 deaths per 100 000 population in 1994—three times higher than in France which had a rate of 22.2 deaths per 100 000.

Breast cancer is one of the primary causes of premature female mortality in both countries. While this has generally been falling slowly in Britain over the last two decades, in 1994 it was still slightly higher than the French rate, which has remained fairly steady for fifteen years. □

Social Trends 28 is published by the Stationery Office, price £39.50.