

Briefing Note

No. 24
23.6.82

THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

Improved Pay Offer

The Government has improved its pay offer to National Health Service staff in a way that takes account of two recent developments.

First, after a ballot earlier this month, the Royal College of Nursing rejected the previous offer and was quickly followed by representatives of other professional groups such as midwives and physiotherapists.

Second, the offer to ancillaries was effectively set at 4 per cent last December. This figure has been overtaken by subsequent pay awards. For example, the average increase of 5.9 per cent to civil servants, 6 per cent to teachers, and 6.1 per cent to the armed forces, meant that the offer to ancillaries compared favourably with other public sector awards.

The Secretary of State for Social Services, Mr. Norman Fowler, in a statement in the House of Commons on 23rd June, announced that a further £90 million would be available in negotiating a new pay offer. He said that "this would increase the average pay of nurses and midwives and the professions supplementary to medicine by 7½ per cent, ambulancemen and hospital pharmacists by 6½ per cent and other groups of staff by 6 per cent ... These improved offers both maintain the special position of nurses and other staff providing direct patient care and bring offers to all groups of staff on a par with other recent awards in the public sector."

The Royal College of Nursing (which accounts for about half of all nurses) and the Royal College of Midwives have recommended that the offer be accepted. Regrettably, the TUC health service unions rejected the improved offers and are unwilling to resume negotiations. They are proposing that industrial action in hospitals should continue.

As Mr. Fowler said, the Government recognises the special status of nurses and midwives. Since 1979 their pay has been increased ahead of prices and their hours of work have been reduced from 40 to 37½ hours per week. For the future, the Government is discussing new permanent arrangements on pay, in time for the next pay round. These long-term arrangements will also cover members of the paramedical professions such as physiotherapists and radiographers.

Implications for the Health Service. A proportion of the resources required to finance the improved offer made for the present pay round will have to be found from within the existing Health Service budget. This will have some implications for the future of the NHS. But a doubling of the offer to 12 per cent as demanded by the TUC unions could only be financed by making substantial cuts in patient services and in jobs.

Patients' Welfare

Mr. Fowler has paid tribute to: "the many thousands of people who have continued working in the Health Service - nurses and doctors, and many others who ... are continuing to care for patients. They, I believe, are the people in the Health Service who are rightly attracting the support and the sympathy of the public. They are the people with whom the Government are most concerned to deal fairly." (Hansard, 10th June 1982).

Unfortunately this concern for patients has not been shared by others, whose industrial disruption, which began on 26th April, has caused unnecessary distress and suffering. For example in Derbyshire Royal Infirmary forty non-urgent operations had to be cancelled in a week; five patients had to be sent home without being operated on; and standards of cleanliness - vital to avoid post-operative infection - are declining ('New Society', 17th June 1982). At Broadgreen Hospital in Liverpool the porters' shop steward crossed out five operations which he did not consider life-saving and even emergency cover has not always been provided so that, for example, on 4th June no services were provided by ambulancemen in Ipswich and Northumbria ('Guardian', 28th May 1982, and 'Financial Times', 8th June 1982).

Furthermore, the intervention on picket lines of other union members totally unconnected with the NHS shows the dispute is being misused by outsiders such as Mr. Arthur Scargill, the miners' leader, for wider political ambitions. They are not interested in health matters but only in opposing the Government's trade union legislation. The determination to widen the conflict is reflected by a COHSE spokesman threatening to call a general strike in order to succeed in its aims ('Guardian', 23rd June 1982).

During the 1979 NHS crisis, hospital waiting lists rose as a result of the dispute by no less than 70,000, and the current industrial action will again result in longer queues.

Mr. Albert Spanswick, General Secretary of COHSE, referring to the first of four 24-hour NHS strikes, said that he was "delighted and overwhelmed" with the response ('Times', 20th May 1982). There was no cause for anyone to be delighted when the victims are the innocent and the sick. No civilised society should accept self-congratulations of this kind.

Conservative Record on Health

The record of the Conservative Government since returning to office is an excellent one and underlines its commitment to the National Health Service.

- * Expenditure. The NHS has a budget of over £12 billion a year and, by the end of the current financial year, it will be 6 per cent higher in real terms than in 1979. In other words, the Conservatives are spending more in real terms than was spent in any year of Labour Government.
- * Capital. Under the last Labour Government capital expenditure fell in real terms by one-third. This decline has been halted and total planned expenditure on new hospital schemes now stands at well over £1,000m.
- * Staff. The number of staff (whole-time equivalent) has risen by 47,000 in the two years to September 1981. The bulk of the increase has been among nurses and midwives (34,000) who care directly for patients.
- * Value for Money. Hospital waiting lists have fallen in England alone from 752,000 in March 1979 to a provisional figure of 620,000 in September 1981. Equally important for patients is that (before the current dispute) more people were being treated in hospitals than ever before and that urgent cases were no longer having to wait so long for admission.

Labour Silence

During the 1979 "winter of discontent" Mr. Ennals, then Labour's Secretary of State for Social Services, condemned industrial action in the NHS. Mr. Callaghan complained strongly of "the thuggish act of a walk-out without notice from a children's hospital" and said that he had "never in fifty years been so depressed as a trade unionist" ('Inside the Treasury' by Mr. Joel Barnett, 1982). However, in the present dispute no Labour spokesman has condemned the action being taken by the unions.