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PROGRESS OF THE NHS REFORMS

The debate on the NHS White Paper has progressed considerably since Kenneth Clarke produced his report 'Working for Patients - A Progress Report'. You may want to raise two further issues in tomorrow's meeting.

SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE REPORT

The Social Services Committee has published another report on the NHS Reforms. On the one hand the Committee welcomes greater delegation of management, better information systems, and a new emphasis on quality of care and medical audit. On the other hand they believe our proposed timetable is unrealistic, bearing in mind the paucity of reliable information in the NHS.

It may have been more accurate to describe our timetable as ambitious. But they are right on the second point. Good quality data is a scarce commodity.

Implementation will depend on the commitment of medical professionals to make the new systems work and the support - financial and technical - from the Department of Health. I am sceptical whether the Department currently has the technical and managerial capacity to drive forward the changes in the timescale required.

You may wish to ask Kenneth Clarke whether the Department is on target to expand the Resource Management Initiative to 50 hospitals. By when?

Does the Department have the managerial expertise in information technology to drive forward the changes? Or will we need to bring in new blood from outside? For example, 14 companies in the service sector could be asked to second a computer expert to cover each of the 14 Regional Health Authorities.

WINNING OVER THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

There is no doubt that the BMA's personal attack on Kenneth Clarke has backfired. Yesterday's Sunday Times' editorial strongly supports the Government's position:

'A BMA victory has to be resisted, therefore, with determination by those who wish to see new life breathed into the NHS for the benefit of patients and doctors alike'.

'Mr Clarke should not falter, therefore, in his determination to win the battle of the NHS'.

Both the Independent and Daily Telegraph editorials were equally forceful last week.

Yet there are many doctors and nurses who still remain unconvinced. Their understanding of the reforms is often based on the distorted advertising campaigns of the BMA and the Labour Party rather than on the actual proposals set out in the Government's White Paper.

There are two specific points we could act on fairly quickly:

Dissemination of information

Many GPs, clinicians and nurses still do not have a basic knowledge of the Government's main proposals. Several doctors have told me that the White Paper summaries have not been

distributed widely in their hospitals. Department of Health officials are aware of this problem.

You may wish to ask Kenneth Clarke what effort is being made at each level of the NHS (Region, District, Hospital, FPC) to ensure that medical professionals are aware of the basic facts. Judgements can then be made on the basis of a clear understanding of the proposals; not merely on the BMA propaganda.

The need for advocates

There is a dire need for strong influential advocates of reform from within the medical profession. Currently there are far too few.

The Conservative Medical Society has recently distributed a questionnaire to its members. They aim to produce a list of over 20 'able' speakers who would be prepared to stand-up publicly and articulate their views on the White Paper proposals.

You may wish to ask Kenneth Clarke whether there are any influential non-CMS members who could also be encouraged to speak out (eg Royal College Presidents).

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