

A Matter of Principle

SIR,—The recent Conference of Local Medical Committees (24 June, *Supplement*, p. 177) has gone down in history as officially recording an overwhelming vote against the "principle" of payment for special experience and service. This must surely, without doubt, be the most incredible and shameful decision ever taken by a conference of learned professional men living in a democracy. I am glad that my name was recorded as voting against it. There were a few of us there who felt that this was an extremely serious matter of principle, and unfortunately the conference saw fit to allow none of us to put any opposing view forward. Presumably the profession will now ask the Government to cease paying any vocational training allowances, as these allowances are entirely payment in recognition of special experience. Presumably, also, we shall now ask that doctors on the obstetric list will be paid at the same rate as doctors not on the obstetric list.

That this shameful state has arisen is, I am sure, entirely the fault of members of the General Medical Services Committee who phrased the wording of the referendum. I sincerely believe that the vast majority of people who voted in the referendum do not really disbelieve in the principle of rewarding merit, and that they were answering an entirely different question. The question which they answered, and which I believe is the question which should have been put, is, "Do you believe that it is possible to devise a completely fair scheme for distributing merit awards in a way suggested by the Working Party?" Had this been the ques-

tion put, I am sure that there would have been an almost 100% answer of "No."

I wonder what will be the feelings and thoughts of any young doctor about entering a branch of the profession which has stated overwhelmingly it does not believe in the rewarding of merit? I believe, and I know that I am not alone, that if the conference had been willing even to consider—which it was not—a scheme for the direct and automatic reward for the possession of certain criteria it might have been possible to persuade the Government to give favourable consideration to using the £2½m. This is already done in the armed Forces and public health services by the payment of extra money for the possession of diplomas. Once the Ministry and the profession had agreed what attributes they would like to see the general practitioners possessing I do not see how any Government could fail at least very carefully to consider the rewarding of these attributes directly. Now that the fear that a scheme involving selection and secrecy might be imposed on the profession has been removed, I hope and trust that every general practitioner will spare a few minutes seriously to consider the real implications of this appallingly bad decision taken at the recent conference. Then perhaps pressure can be brought through the local medical committees to see to it that, while rejecting the Working Party's proposal, it again becomes the policy of family doctors that as a matter of principle whenever possible and practicable merit shall be rewarded.—I am, etc.,

Talgarth, Brecon.

J. M. LONDON.

B.M.A. Action

SIR,—My motion that modern techniques of sampling public opinion should be used by the B.M.A. to find out whether the public thinks enough money is being spent on the N.H.S. was carried without a dissenting vote by the Junior Members Forum.¹ As Dr. J. F. Pigott said, nothing would be gained from this if Mr. Enoch Powell was right in saying² that present expenditure reflects electoral opinion. But Mr. Powell's argument that the constancy of N.H.S. expenditure must reflect electoral opinion is a *non sequitur*. If both major political parties have the same policy on this the electorate is gagged. Their real opinions can be brought to light only by research. A trace of action here would achieve more than years of talk. Since the Ministry (if it agrees with Mr. Powell) has the onus of proof and the B.M.A. that of disproof, they should co-operate in the experiment.

If raising the N.H.S. budget were electorally popular would not one or both parties have included it in their platform? That presupposes an infallible clairvoyance by politicians that has sometimes failed them in the past. The N.H.S. is assumed to be good enough if the public makes few complaints. The answer is put the public in the picture first and then ask if the N.H.S. budget is adequate. The taxpayers have to judge whether the N.H.S. should have priority over other claims on the revenue. We do not know for sure what their verdict would be. But if they supported the B.M.A.'s view that

more money should be spent on the N.H.S. the profession would have a vastly more powerful weapon than it had ever had, since public opinion is the dynamite that moves Governments.

Many doctors think the extra money urgently needed by the N.H.S. should come from direct payments by patients. But it is generally thought that the majority of the electorate believe that medicine should be financed out of taxes, not by direct payment. Would not the future of medicine be far brighter if doctors and patients were united on this? The last Tory Minister of Health dismissed direct payment in one sentence. Do we seriously think Mr. Kenneth Robinson will be more amenable?—I am, etc.,

Bristol Royal Infirmary,
Bristol.

R. S. CORMACK.

REFERENCES

- ¹ *Brit. med. J. Suppl.*, 1967, 2, 115.
- ² *Brit. med. J.*, 1967, 1, 556.

Recognizing Experience

SIR,—Much has been heard recently about efforts to reverse the "brain drain" of doctors. My present predicament highlights one reason why these are unlikely to be successful.

In New Zealand I held a registrar appointment for nine months and was for three months a senior house-officer at the Postgraduate School of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in the University of Auckland, a post

which is recognized by the College in this country. On my return I took an appointment as senior house-officer, necessary for approved training purposes, and applied for protection of salary through my regional board. The reply they received from the Ministry stated that there are no provisions for reckoning experience outside the hospital service in this country for incremental purposes.

It seems strange to find that in a so-called "national" service a colleague from the same hospital in Auckland, when he first came to work in this country, was allowed full credit for his experience.

I wonder how many others have had such preferential treatment and how many like myself have had experience shunned, perhaps because they have had the misfortune to work for one of the less sympathetic regional boards.

Obviously you must choose your regional board carefully, and those lured from overseas to return to the N.H.S. should be aware that the experience thus obtained, unless under the auspices of the Ministry of Overseas Development, is of no value to the N.H.S. and they would be well advised to stay where it is appreciated.—I am, etc.,

Luton and Dunstable
Hospital,
Luton, Beds.

R. H. T. WARD.

Is There a Shortage?

SIR,—One year ago the Seventh Report of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration¹ contained the observation (paragraph 59, iii): "There is no sign . . . that there is any difficulty in filling (consultant) appointments."

However, the Joint First Report on the Negotiations with N.H.S. Hospital Doctors and Dentists (*Supplement*, 27 May, p. 135) includes the following: "The Department pointed out that some existing consultant posts were difficult to fill. . . . They undertook to invite . . . all boards to re-advertise vacant posts."

There seems to be an inconsistency here which calls for an explanation from the Ministry.—I am, etc.,

ROBERT J. EVANS.

North West Surrey Group
Laboratory,
St. Peter's Hospital,
Chertsey, Surrey.

REFERENCE

- ¹ *Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration, Seventh Report, 1966, Cmd. 2992, H.M.S.O.*

Merit Awards to Hospital Staff

SIR,—The attitude of hospital staff towards merit awards is at present being assessed by a postal ballot conducted by the British Medical Association, and the position concerning these awards has also been dealt with by letters in the *Daily Telegraph* of 16 June *et seq.*

If merit awards are to continue, and there may be a case for this, it is clear that it is generally felt that the present secrecy which surrounds them should be abolished, and they should be fair and seen to be fair, and