

Blair promises to raise spending on NHS to European average

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

Britain's prime minister, Tony Blair, pledged more money for the NHS this week, promising on television to raise the proportion of the UK gross domestic product spent on health from the present 6.8% to the European national average, 8%. If he carries out his pledge, spending on the NHS will rise by at least £9bn (\$14.4bn).

Mr Blair was forced to take the initiative on health following a week of damaging headlines in the media. It started with accusations from opposition politicians that the NHS was not coping with the flu outbreak and climaxed with an attack on government health policy from one of Labour's own supporters, Lord

Robert Winston, professor of fertility studies at the Hammersmith Hospital, London.

After Professor Winston's remarks in the *New Statesman* last Friday, other organisations immediately weighed in with their own criticisms of government's inadequate spending.

Mr Barry Jackson, president of the Royal College of Surgeons, said: "We desperately need more doctors, but at the present time the number of surgeons in training is being reduced, and there are signs that there will be insufficient consultant posts for those already in training."

The Intensive Care Society also challenged the government's claim to have increased

the number of intensive care beds by 100 since the autumn. Giles Morgan, the society's president, said its members did not know where the new beds were to be found.

Mr Blair, speaking on BBC television's *Breakfast with Frost* programme, admitted that spending on the NHS, currently £45bn, was "too low at the moment." He said that real term annual increases of about 5% in the next comprehensive spending review would take the United Kingdom up to the EU average. The review is due for completion in July and will set out spending plans up to 2003-4.

He agreed that the NHS was facing problems and accepted that it was his responsibility "to put the situation right," but he did not think that higher taxes were the answer. He pledged that that this year's pay awards to doctors and nurses would be met in full. □

UK nurses and doctors receive pay boost

Linda Beecham *BMJ*

About 60000 experienced nurses in the United Kingdom have been awarded a 7.8% increase (worth up to £1390 (\$2224 a year) to improve career progression and reward skill and experience. This means that from 1 April the basic pay of an experienced staff nurse outside London will rise to about £19220.

The nurses' pay review body, which made the recommendation, has also proposed that another 5500 enrolled and auxiliary nurses should get a 7% increase. Other nurses, midwives, and health visitors will receive a 3.4% increase.

Announcing the recommendations, which the government has accepted in full, the health secretary, Alan Milburn, said that the increase for nurses was high "set against the current headline inflation rate and more than we are expecting for pay settlements in the public sector generally."

But he said that the rises to many of the nurses who deliver hands-on patient care "recognise and value their contribution to the NHS."

This is the second consecutive year that nurses have received an increase that is larger than inflation, but the general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, Christine Hancock, said that "only time would tell" whether the extra cash would stop nurses leaving the NHS.

Doctors and dentists in the NHS will receive a 3.3% increase. The recommendations of the pay review body for doctors and dentists have also been accepted in full. The salary of a first year house officer will rise to £17260 and that of a specialist registrar to £24070. A consultant's salary scale will range from £48905 to £63640.

Stephen Thornton, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, warned that with no new money to fund the pay rises NHS managers faced a difficult time trying to balance the books in the coming year. He said, "The government needs to be very careful explaining to the public how quickly the NHS can improve." □

Lord Winston attacks Labour's health policy

Gavin Yamey *BMJ*

Lord Robert Winston, professor of fertility studies at the Hammersmith Hospital, London, and a Labour peer, publicly criticised his party last week for making "medical care deeply unsatisfactory for a lot of people."

In an interview with the journalist Mary Riddell published in *New Statesman* magazine, Lord Winston discussed the care that

his 87 year old mother recently received in an NHS hospital. "She waited 13 hours in casualty," he said, "before getting a bed in a mixed sex ward—a place we said we would abolish. None of her drugs were given on time, she missed meals, and she was found lying on the floor when the morning staff came on."

Discussing current NHS provision within his own specialty of reproductive medicine, he said: "The truth is that our services are much the worst in Europe. There are fewer [in vitro fertilisation] treatment cycles under this government than there were under the Tories."

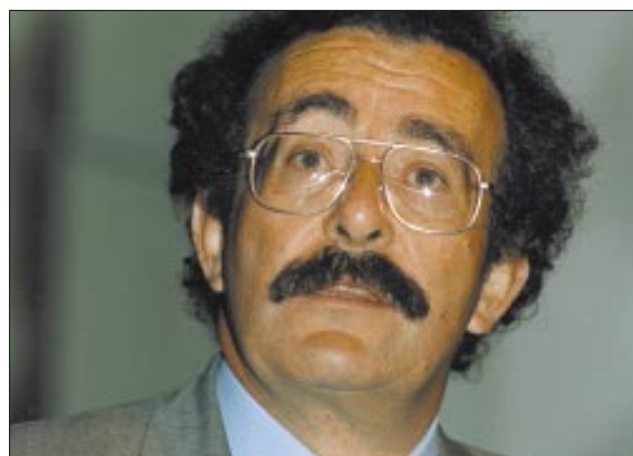
Lord Winston attacked the policies that have led to such

"deteriorating" health care. In particular, he said that the Labour party had reneged on its pre-election commitment to abolish the internal market. "We still have an internal market," he said, "but instead of commissioning by local health authorities, we have primary care groups. I think we've been quite deceitful about it."

He called for the government to examine new ways of funding the NHS, saying: "It's a question of changing the whole way the package is funded." The worsening trend in health care provision can only be reversed, he argued, through increasing taxation or through private insurance schemes.

Lord Winston may have breached patient confidentiality by revealing details of the birth plans of Cherie Blair, the British prime minister's wife. When Mary Riddell mentioned Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, Lord Winston said: "Oh, that's where Cherie Blair is having her caesarean section."

Shortly after publication of the interview on 14 January, Lord Winston retracted some of his comments. He said: "I did not mean, and I wish to stress this, that the government are deceiving people over the NHS. I certainly do not believe that the NHS is worse under this government than the last government." □



Lord Winston retracted some of his criticism