

Briefing Note

No. 19
19.5.82

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

The campaign of industrial action being taken by certain health service unions is unjustified and is causing unnecessary suffering to the sick. Patients are the first to suffer from the withdrawal of services and, in the long term, the morale of staff as a whole as well as the confidence of the public in the NHS will be undermined.

Pay: Offers and Demands

Doctors and dentists have been offered a pay increase of 6 per cent and the indications are that this will be accepted.

The offers to other main groups in the National Health Service are as follows:

Ambulancemen	5 per cent
Ancillaries	4 per cent
Nurses and Midwives	6.4 per cent

The Health Service unions are asking for a pay increase of 12 per cent, which would cost about £400 million extra on top of the existing offer.

Mr. Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, has emphasised that: "We simply do not have that kind of money available. It could only be provided by cutting services to patients" (London, 13th May 1982).

Patients First

The industrial action being taken by NUPE, COHSE and NALGO has been strongly condemned by the Government.

For any trade union leader to claim that patients will not suffer is inexcusable. The withdrawal of services can only mean that hospital provision will deteriorate and patients will not receive the care and consideration that they deserve.

Mr. Fowler has commented: "Let us make no mistake about it - industrial action will harm patient services. In 1979 the number of people on waiting lists grew by 70,000 to over 750,000 as a direct result of industrial action." (London, 13th May 1982).

Reports from all over the country show the harm now being done to patients. For example, at Dulwich Hospital, London, daily operations have been reduced to two or three instead of the normal twenty; at Arrow Park Hospital in Birkenhead the administrator has denounced the level of cover being provided to patients as "totally unacceptable"; and in Sunderland five of the seven hospitals have been reduced to accident and emergency services only, and non-urgent patients have been turned away ("The Times", 13th May and "Financial Times", 15th May 1982).

Furthermore, COHSE intends to reduce all hospitals in the country to accident and emergency services only over the next week and its General Secretary, Mr. Spanswick, has threatened to withdraw all cover if any of his members are disciplined for strike action. ("Guardian", 13th May, 1982).

Nurses

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is balloting its members on whether to accept the pay offer, and since about half of all nurses belong to the RCN the result (expected in early June) will be of great importance.

The RCN is also balloting its members on its rule debarring them from strike action. This rule has been strongly reaffirmed in the past and seems likely to be so again.

Under the present Government the pay and conditions of nurses have been greatly improved:

- * Nurses' pay has been raised substantially. For example, in the two years to April 1982 a staff nurse on basic salary maximum will have had her pay increased from £3,683 to £5,426, a rise of 47 per cent and well ahead of the rise in prices of 36 per cent over the same period.
- * Their working week was reduced in 1980 from 40 to 37½ hours.
- * The number of nurses and midwives (whole-time equivalents) has risen by about 34,000 in the two years to September 1981.

The Government wishes to put pay negotiations on a more sensible basis and has initiated discussions on new permanent arrangements which would avoid similar disputes in future years.

Ancillaries

The average basic pay of the 172,000 ancillary workers (whole-time equivalents) rose exactly in line with prices between their pay awards of December 1978 and April 1981.

In addition, as Mr. Fowler has pointed out, "shift work and overtime payments allow weekly earnings far in excess of weekly rates. For example a full-time male ancillary worker, whose basic rate is about £65 per week, earns on average about £106 per week." ("The Times", 18th May 1982).

This year's offer to ancillaries is below the rate of inflation but this is common to the great majority of public sector employees. Account must also be taken of the job security they enjoy and the inflation-proofed pensions to which full-time public servants are entitled.

The Conservative Record in the NHS

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

- * At the last General Election the Conservatives promised to increase the resources of the NHS and this promise has been fulfilled. Total spending has risen in real terms since 1979 by about 6 per cent and now stands at over £12 billion a year.
- * Over £1,000 million has been set aside for major new hospital buildings.
- * The number of directly employed NHS staff in England alone rose by over 47,000 (whole-time equivalents) in the two years to September 1981. This figure includes 34,000 more nurses and midwives who provide direct patient care.
- * Hospital waiting lists have fallen in England alone from 752,000 in March 1979 to 628,000 in March 1981 and provisional figures for September 1981 show a further reduction to 620,000.