

Hew

PRIME MINISTER

You may like to glance through Tony Newton's and Edwina Currie's speeches in the health debate yesterday. They made a very effective case, though it is clear that they are now up against a more competent opponent in Robin Cook than in his predecessor, Michael Meacher.

The main message which comes across in the speeches by Tony Newton and Edwina Currie is that to a large extent the difficulties faced by the Service are the consequences of its success, not its failure. For instance:

- more people are living longer
- more babies - particularly those weighing very little at birth - can be saved
- more expensive equipment to offer the latest treatment is being used.

Edwina Currie refers to the well known hope in 1946 that once the health of the population had been got right, it would not be expensive to keep it ticking over at that level. We now know that health care is rather like scientific discovery - unlock one door, and you reveal a dozen more.

The other point which comes over clearly is that Labour's policies would have a direct and negative effect on health service resources, quite apart from any longer term impact that their economic policies would have. For instance, all the following would cut NHS resources: abolishing NHS charges; cutting out pay beds; cutting back on surplus land sales; not proceeding with the proposals for generating income set out earlier this week; taking off the pressure to introduce more efficient health service management; and cutting out competitive tendering.

The impact of these policies would come to at least £1 billion - the increase in expenditure planned next year.

MARK ADDISON

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