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Milburn promises more hospital beds

Judy Jones *London*

The steady fall in the number of acute hospital beds in England must be reversed if the government is to achieve its aim of expanding NHS capacity and treating more patients, Alan Milburn, the health secretary, told a Commons committee.

"We have an underdoctored, undernursed, underbedded system, and we must dramatically increase the number of patients treated and reduce waits," Mr Milburn told MPs. "We have to see an expansion in general and acute beds."

In evidence to the health, select committee inquiry into NHS spending, Mr Milburn strenuously defended the private finance initiative (PFI), a method for procuring new hospitals and other healthcare facilities in the NHS, against the welter of criticism that has engulfed the policy.

Some independent analyses have concluded that the PFI has not only failed to match traditional methods of publicly financed procurement of buildings in terms of value for money but also exacerbated the contraction of hospital capacity. But

Mr Milburn reeled off a string of statistics that he claimed showed the reverse was true.

There are currently 34 hospital building schemes of £10m or more in procurement. Of these 24 were funded under the PFI. Overall these would result in a loss of 326 general and acute beds, an average of 13 per PFI scheme, compared with current provision. By contrast, the remaining nine publicly funded schemes are expected to lose 238 general and acute beds, an average of 23 beds lost per scheme. "The idea that the PFI is a destroyer of beds is proven wrong," the minister said. "But in the next tranche of new hospitals, we would expect to see not a decrease in the number of hospital beds but an increase—otherwise we will not be able to do what we have said in the NHS plan, that we want to do—to grow capacity, treat more patients, and get waiting times down."

In reply to Labour MP John Austin, Mr Milburn was unable to give a baseline date for the bed loss comparisons, but added that he would write to the committee with this information.

Mr Milburn denied charges by David Hinchliffe, the Labour chairman of the health select committee, that the government's concordat with the private sector could benefit NHS consultants more than patients. "When you shift more work into



These modern art images, designed to encourage smokers to seek help if they wish to give up cigarettes, have been commissioned by the World Health Organization for poster campaigns in France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom. They are part of a collection of 20 on display at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 22-26 November.

The posters, bearing the slogan "If you want to give up, ask how," will be placed in doctors' waiting rooms and pharmacies "We have seen how creative the tobacco industry is in using art to promote and market cigarettes," said Roberto Bertolini, strategic director of WHO Europe. "We need to be just as creative as the tobacco industry so that smoking is no longer seen as a harmless habit but as the killer it really is." The works shown here are by Milena Dopitova of the Czech Republic (left) and the UK artist Gavin Turk.

the private sector, those doctors who moonlight will get more [outside] work and spend less time in the NHS," Mr Hinchliffe said.

Mr Milburn replied that he wanted NHS consultants working in NHS time to use spare capacity in the private sector.

However, he conceded there could be opportunities for NHS consultants to boost their income from private work under the concordat. "I would not rule out the NHS purchasing care from private hospitals using NHS consultants working in their own time." □

Ireland opts to encourage breast feeding at work

Doug Payne *Dublin*

Employers in Ireland will have to provide breastfeeding facilities during working hours for the first four months after childbirth if new mothers choose not to take their full maternity leave. The government has also promised to bring the country into line with the rest of the European Union on maternity leave, increasing paid maternity leave from 14 to 18 weeks and unpaid maternity leave from four to eight weeks.

The changes, due next year, come after talks between the government and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, which were held as part of a review of

the government's social contract with unions and employers.

Joan Carmichael, the congress industrial officer for equality and partnership, said the group welcomed any initiative allowing women at work to breast feed or express milk.

Employers will be required to provide employees who wish to breast feed their children with either "an adjustment in working hours" or workplace facilities to breast feed for the first four months after birth. Pay will not be deducted for production time lost as a result.

The Department of Health and Children has recently been

promoting breast feeding; the health promotion unit is shortly to appoint a national breastfeeding coordinator. The measures go some way towards the implementation of the department's 1994 policy recommendations on breast feeding, which advocated that "by 1998, the public sector and in particular the health sector, should be giving a lead in the provision of workplace creche facilities and lactation breaks."

The La Leche League of Ireland, which launched its latest national awareness campaign this week, welcomed the news on breast feeding at work. "It is a recognition of the needs of women who wish to continue to breast feed following their return to work," said the league's Ireland coordinator, Mary Bird. "From the employers' perspective, the require-

ment to provide breastfeeding facilities is easily met: a quiet room, respect for a woman's need for lactation breaks, and support for her desire to provide her baby with all the benefits of breast feeding. This would have far reaching consequences for infant health and maternal wellbeing," she added.

Peter Flood, a spokesman for the Irish Business Employers Organisation, said that the provision wouldn't affect most employers to any great degree. "In the majority of cases," he explained, "women would be availing themselves of the full amount of maternity leave available, and with an increase to 18 weeks paid leave, and a tendency to work until about two weeks before birth, many would not return to work until after the four month period in any case." □