

THE FUTURE OF MEDICINE

Section I

Good afternoon! Today, I'm going to talk about some problems affecting health care systems in Western countries. Whilst I'll concentrate on issues affecting the British health service, other countries are confronting the same difficulties to a greater or lesser degree.

Section II

First amongst these are the demographic changes occurring in the West. As the average life expectancy slowly increases and the birth rate stabilises at a low level, the result is a shift in the age profile of the population. In other words, more people are old these days. The elderly, who no longer contribute to the creation of wealth, form a greater proportion of the population. They are intensive users of health care resources. The proportion of young people, whose tax payments finance all forms of welfare provision, is at the same time decreasing. The danger is that there may not be enough money available to support health care systems in their current form. This has resulted in a fundamental reconsideration of systems of health provision.

Section III

In Britain, recent government dogma has been that people should be encouraged to pay for their health care, rather than expect it from the state system. Some people could certainly afford to pay for health care, but the people who need the care most, such as the old and the chronically ill, are the ones least able to buy the care they need. And there are two, more fundamental, reasons why an increase in the private sector cannot provide a realistic solution to the funding problem. The first is that increasing needs have to be met with increased resources. A switch from public to private finance would not increase the overall total spent on care. And this is less in Britain as a percentage of gross national product than in most other West European countries or in the USA. The second reason is one of efficiency. It is a simple fact that the public health care system in Britain is more efficient and cost-effective than any other health system, public or private. And it's noticeable that private health care companies are not interested in competing over most of the field of health care, because there is no money in it.

Section IV

There is, however, another more forward-looking approach to health care. This is the idea of prevention. If sickness and disease are expensive, then it will be cheaper to prevent them where this can be done. The initiation of preventative policies requires major changes in society with attention turned to such matters as nutrition, housing, environment and working conditions. Unfortunately, this conflicts with the interests of businessmen and politicians who deal principally with short-term profit rather than long-term gain. At present, the political will to bring about social change in the interests of health is largely lacking. But the realities of the situation suggest that it is unlikely to remain so.