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Correspondents are urged to write briefly so that readers may be offered as wide a selection of letters as possible. So many are being received that the omission of some is inevitable. Letters should be signed personally by all their authors.

Private practice and the National Health Service

SIR,—Mrs Barbara Castle told the House of Commons on 15 December that Lord Goodman's proposals for the phasing-out of private practice from NHS hospitals (27 December, p 771) will "ensure that the policy of separation is achieved." This policy breaks the agreement upon which the medical profession undertook to work within the NHS in 1948 and will destroy the concept of the "geographical whole-time consultant," which has ensured optimal consultant cover for patients in the NHS and constitutes our strongest defence against a monopoly employer.

The idea of an "independent" board which will be ordered to carry out Government policy is an anathema. Not only will the board envisaged by Lord Goodman be instructed to phase out the pay-beds; it will be directed within six months of the Royal Assent (to the Bill) to make recommendations about the procedures for common waiting lists, and it may be given unspecified "reserve powers" to ensure that the private sector does not significantly "endanger" the NHS. Furthermore, Lord Goodman's document reiterates the Prime Minister's statement in the Queen's Speech that the regulation of the private sector *following the separation of pay-beds* will be subject to further consultation with the professions. However, there is no indication whatsoever that the Government has changed its position concerning the "broad framework"

under which Mrs Castle has clearly stated that these discussions must take place: in particular, that the Government intends to establish a licensing system to control the total volume of private provision for medical care and that the private sector should not absorb any undue proportion of scarce skills achieved by training at public expense.

Looking at this Government's record, even the most naive political onlooker will recognise that Lord Goodman's proposals do not provide enduring "safeguards" for the freedom of choice for the patient and professional freedom of action for the doctor. To leave the matter in the hands of politicians in Parliament to decide would be a total abrogation of professional responsibility. To read that only five Labour and three Conservative MPs were present at the end of a recent Parliamentary debate on the Health Service hardly inspires confidence. If the principle of a "mixed system" is now conceded by accepting the new proposals for the phasing out of pay-beds and the control of the private sector the profession will be left with no other position from which it can defend itself from the inevitable and inexorable progress towards a full-time State medical service, where the doctor's prime responsibility is to the State and not the patient. In the present circumstances the only way our professional freedom can be maintained is by offering to the BMA our undated resignations from the

NHS so that we can build a new system based on individual patient care.

JAMES APPELEYARD

Canterbury, Kent

SIR,—In your issue of 27 December (p 771) you printed "Proposals on private practice discussed by Government and professions." The subtitle indicates that there was a meeting between the Secretary of State and certain representatives of the medical and dental professions on 15 December and adds, "after the meeting the following statement was issued based on proposals put forward for discussion by Lord Goodman," thereby implying that this was a combined statement from those at the meeting. However, I am reputedly informed that the statement was written by Lord Goodman himself. A further point of importance is that among the professions' representatives is listed "Sir Rodney Smith, president, Royal College of Surgeons." What is not made clear is that Sir Rodney was there in a purely personal capacity following an earlier request he had made for a meeting with the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister, having accepted Sir Rodney's suggestion of a personal meeting, then invited certain other professional representatives to what became a series of secret meetings.

We read in para 2 of Lord Goodman's statement that "the legislation would contain first a broad declaration that private beds and facilities should be separated from the NHS; secondly, an expression of the Government's commitment to the maintenance of private medical and dental practice . . . through the renewal of the provision in the