

Blair must raise taxes to eradicate child poverty, academics say

Wendy Moore *Harrogate*

Prime Minister Blair has no alternative but to raise taxes if he is to reach his goal of eradicating child poverty in the United Kingdom within 20 years, a leading public health academic has warned.

The government has made a good start towards reducing poverty with a raft of welfare measures including those announced in last month's budget, said David Piachaud, professor of social policy at the London School of Economics. It is now necessary for the government not only to maintain action to achieve its targets but probably to accelerate its action, he told the annual conference of the UK Public Health Association last week.

"Our society has created child poverty and for too long has tolerated it. It can be ended," said Professor Piachaud, who is a

former advisor to the British Labour party.

He applauded the government's action so far, which will lift an estimated 1.2 million children out of poverty by the end of this parliament, but poverty was still an important issue. The United Kingdom came third from the bottom in a recent UNICEF league table measuring poverty in 24 industrialised countries, behind only the United States and the Russian Federation, said Professor Piachaud. The proportion of children living in poverty is twice as great in the United Kingdom as it is in France and Holland and five times greater than that in the Nordic countries, he said.

The government has already redistributed wealth by increasing child benefit and implementing other reforms to the welfare system but there is a

danger of creating a "two class world" in which some families survive on high amounts of welfare support and others live on low income with very little government help.

"I cannot see any alternative to more redistribution towards poor families and children. That means higher taxes," he said.

At the same time there needs to be more action in areas such as nutrition, smoking, and alcohol use to ensure that inequalities in children's health decrease at the same time as child poverty, he urged. He warned that the 25 pence (15 cent) rise on a packet of 20 cigarettes announced in the budget would leave poor parents who smoke worse off and that this could harm their children.

His views were supported by Michael Marmot, professor of epidemiology and public health at University College, London, who was a member of the recent Acheson inquiry into inequalities in health. Professor Marmot said that he supported raising tobacco prices but was concerned that those least likely to give up smoking would be hardest hit. □

Ireland faces shortage of doctors

Doug Payne *Dublin*

There is a growing shortage of doctors from outside the European Union in the Republic of Ireland. Doctors' leaders attribute the situation to the introduction just over three years ago of stricter assessment exams, which include proficiency in English.

A number of senior doctors are warning that the situation is now so critical that some hospital departments may possibly collapse this summer.

When the new system was put in place in December 1996, there were more than 1000 applications a year for temporary registration from doctors outside the European Union. The number has plummeted, and when the first exam was to be held it had to be postponed because only four applications had been received. Although the numbers have risen somewhat, there are still fewer than 100 applicants a year.

Late last month, Mr Colman O'Leary, the chairman of the Accident and Emergency Consultants Association, told the *Irish Medical Times* that applications had dropped by 90% from suitable non-consultant hospital doctors seeking work in accident and emergency departments beginning in July this year.

Another accident and emergency consultant told the same publication that he had short listed 15 non-consultant hospital doctors for seven posts and not one turned up for an interview. Asian graduates, for example, must arrange their visas and travel to Dublin at their own expense to sit the proficiency exam.

The same graduates are able to sit the registration exams for the United Kingdom in their own countries. Even junior doctors from within the European Union face delays and expenses. They must pay £1400 (£308; \$490) to the Medical Council to have their qualifications checked, a process that can take weeks or even months. □

Health minister announces initiatives on men's health

Gavin Yamey *BMJ*

New government proposals to promote men's health and address gender inequalities in life expectancy have been announced by Yvette Cooper, minister for public health. The proposals are the most significant acknowledgement of men's health needs since 1992 when the chief medical officer for England described gender differences in health in his annual report.

Speaking at a conference on young men's health last week at Aston University, Birmingham, Ms Cooper said: "We know that the biggest health inequality that exists is between men and women. If you are a man you are likely to die on average five years earlier than a woman. This health gap is wider for men from less affluent backgrounds."

Discussing the health prob-

lems faced specifically by boys and young men, she said that fetal mortality was higher among males, that "[mothers'] postnatal depression has more effect on boys than girls, boys are more likely to experience accidents, and suicide rates are four times higher in teenage boys than in girls."

Promoting men's health has failed so far, said Ms Cooper, because "the nagging nanny state approach is a complete turn off." The newly formed Health Development Agency, formerly the

Health Education Authority, has been asked to address the promotion of men's health. Other measures announced at the conference include smoking cessation clinics in low income areas and a strategy to reduce men's alcohol consumption.

Ms Cooper hopes that the new national service framework for coronary heart disease (11 March, p 665) will "save men's lives and improve their health." Government funding for research on prostate cancer, will be doubled. □



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