

Business as usual for 'no strike' GP

TWO weeks ago I collided with the ambulance drivers' pay dispute.

I had just arrived at the surgery after visits when a call came from a worried lady saying her husband had a pain in his chest. As she spoke, panic came into her voice: 'Oh! He's just collapsed!'

I arrived impressively at the door within two minutes and made the diagnosis which had never been in doubt to anyone.

My usual policy of keeping myocardial infarctions at home was clearly not on here, in view of his poor condition, the panic of his wife, and the fact that he was sprawled halfway up the stairs, so that even the combined efforts of the next-door neighbour, his hernia, and myself could not shift him.

Arranging an ungainly collection of chairs and cushions to elevate his feet, I dialled for an ambulance, already aware that the drivers had, without prior notice, called a strike.

'Are there any ambulances?' I said.

'No.'

'That's criminal,' I said.

Learning that my patient was likely to die, the ambulance controller graciously agreed to try to organise a police van or perhaps a milk float to carry him to hospital. After a lengthy wait, a little St John's job arrived hotfoot from the nearest Gymkhana, with its volunteer crew ready to do their best.

By the time we had manhandled my patient downstairs on to a stretcher, the driver was more dyspnoeic than he was while the plump little lady assistant seemed to see it as her major task in life to administer Entonox to her charge, despite my assurances that he was well tanked up with diamorphine.

Before we pass judgment on the ambulance staff, let us remember there has been 'industrial action', to use the doubly inept phrase, on the part of doctors before now. I was a student during a junior doctors' dispute and sat in on several strike meetings, where the cream of the nation's caring professionals became progressively more steamed up.

Mostly, the anger was about the bad press they were receiving, or the bizarre claims of some medically-qualified nit in the Government that doctors below the rank of consultant deserved nothing because they were still in training.

Compassionate SHOs argued with passion that we should all refuse to sign death certificates, which, they said, would not harm patients but raise a stink.

Unnoticed at the crux of the dispute was the obvious truth that, in any strike by doctors, the battle is about whether the doctors or the Government will feel the pangs of conscience first. Viewed in that light, the doctors could not win, or if they did, they would have proved for all

time that they were more callous than the politicians.

We have just had a disappointing pay round, and there are rumblings in the wind that, if it happens again, some form of industrial action might be contemplated. We reason, perhaps rightly, that we should not be treated like this.

But the real question is not the rights or wrongs of our case, but what we do about it. It was clearly wrong of Russia to invade Afghanistan, but who suggests we bomb Moscow in response? Neither can I see that it would be in any way ethical, moral, or even productive to withdraw our services from those who need them, in pursuit of our own interests.

So, comrades, when the massed strikers march from Princes Gate to the Palace of Westminster crying 'solidarity!' I'm afraid it will be business as usual in my neck of the woods.

Dr Jon Garvey