Start cracking the whip

ROLL UP! Roll up! The circus is in town! That's certainly how it feels at the moment as everyone rushes to leap on the health service bandwagon. The tabloid press has excelled itself with its topical tips on how to save the NHS. If the situation were not so dire it would be quite entertaining. But the situation is dire and the government is evidently shaken by all the adverse publicity.

The government's decision to announce the pay award for nursing and other health professions much earlier in the year than usual was certainly no accident. It must have been seen as a bit of a tonic for a health service tottering feebly from the effects of flu. The prime minister has also written to thank nurses for their hard work during the latest health service crisis. He obviously thinks nurses are wonderful. And so say all of us.

So there you go. Has it done the trick? Do you feel bucked up? Has all your hard work over the past few weeks and months been worthwhile?

Well, it would be discourteous not to accept the thank you from 10 Downing Street at face value and with good grace. And it would be very rude indeed not to acknowledge that this year's pay award is a step in the right direction. But is it enough?

Actually, no, it is not. For some of you, the fact that the pay award is not staged does not make up for the potential divisiveness of giving some grades a higher award than others. Those of you at the lower end of both E and F grade scales are smarting at the injustice of life. We have news of one experienced nurse prepared to downgrade from F to E to improve her pay and hence her quality of life. It's a funny old world, isn't it?

Not for the government, it's not. Not for nurses who are worn out and up to their eyes in debt. Not for managers who have to find the money for the pay award from within existing health service resources. Not for patients who are having their operations cancelled. Not for the independent sector picking up the health service pieces and wondering how it will match health service pay increases.

Time for the circus to leave town. Nurses will stay in the profession that the vast majority of them genuinely love if they see that the serious business of healing the health service has begun. Things can only get better: that's right, Mr Blair, isn't it?

See news pages 4 and 5 and analysis page 13

Uniform directive – put a sock in it

OH, NO, surely not. It surely cannot be the case that two trusts are imposing dress code rules on nurses specifying what colour tights they can wear. And if so, we can only hope that the rules are being applied with an eye to potential gender discrimination.

Here at Nursing Standard we would, frankly, be very shocked if goose and genders were not being treated equally. There may be nurses who do not wear tights wandering the wards of our hospitals at this very moment wearing whatever colour socks they fancy. Terrifying.

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