

## Visiting Doctors

Leeds Family Practitioner Committee (FPC) has just permitted 12 female GPs and one elderly male GP working in what one medical newspaper calls 'notorious trouble spots' to use deputising services for night visits.

The deputising service exists for GPs to provide cover in exceptional circumstances. But doctors working as deputies, although medically qualified, need not have had any GP training or prior experience.

In 1984 *World in Action* documented the widespread use of deputies by GPs, resulting in clear rules being issued, for example by my own FPC in Liverpool: 'the use of deputising services shall be restricted to half days and casual or occasional weekend use'. These rules have loopholes and are abused. But the Leeds decision is the first official sanctioning of *routine* deputising.

General practice is about personal and continuous care. It is often at night that people most need to see the familiar face of a doctor they know.

My own experience as a GP working in a notorious trouble spot for eight years, is that at night patients will go out of their way to wait for me, light the way with torches, mind the car etc, exactly *because* they know me.

But there is no denying the very real fear which some women GPs feel for their personal safety. It is, for example, a powerful disincentive for women to join inner-city practices.

An effective solution must recognise this dilemma, and tackle the need for women GPs to have proper support, such as self-defence courses and paid escorts for night calls. Instead, the Leeds FPC decision simply reinforces the atmosphere of fear, and breakdown of GP-based health care which contribute to the creation of 'no-go' areas in the heart of our major cities. •

*Katy Gardiner*