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Letters to the Editor ...

Catholic Physicians' Guild

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Letter to the Editor . . .

Letter from New Zealand

It has been a hard year. The economy is in a mess after 50 years of socialist wastefulness; but then every other country except Japan seems to be in a similar mess. The first nervous harbingers of a financial springtime have made their appearance. Inflation, which was up to 19% in 1984, has fallen to only 1% in 1991. At last there is an overseas trade surplus. But on the debit side unemployment, which was almost unknown in the past, now runs at 12%.

The cause of these dramatic changes is a ruthless rejection of left-wing principles and the introduction of "user pays." Public hospital treatment, both in-patient and out-patient, has been free for as long as most people can remember. There was no such thing as a cashier's office. Patients could walk out of the wards with no formalities any time of day or night.

All that has changed. There will be a means test and an entitlement card system. For those on low incomes treatment will still be free, but for those on average incomes there will be charges (in \$US figures) of \$25 a night for in-patients and \$15 for out-patient visits. But services will be free after 10 nights for in-patients, or after 5 visits for out-patients, or after 15 prescriptions in one year.

These revolutionary changes, which are really inevitable, have caused vigorous opposition. There have been card burnings by patients, opposition by nurses and threats of resignation by some doctors. I expect it will all settle down in a few months.

A much more serious issue has been strikes by junior resident doctors. Nothing like this has ever happened before. In several major hospitals they have struck for one day in the first week, two days in the second, three days in the next week, and so on. Their complaints have been mainly about conditions of work and long hours. In fact they are paid generously because of provision for "overtime" rates, something their older colleagues regard as "riches beyond the dreams of avarice."

As a mild rebuke, since the Medical Association has not had the nerve to say anything, I had a letter in the *NZ Medical Journal* venturing the opinion that once young doctors enter the medical profession they may never strike. This duty is shared by many other people in essential occupations — mothers, clergy, Armed Forces, Police, firemen, food and water services, government and so on.

As in most Western countries there has been an extraordinary increase in violence, mostly rape and murder, especially of child victims. In 1961 there were only 4 murders in the whole country; in 1991 there were 160. At last the Prime Minister, James Bolger, has promised to clamp down on pornography and drugs. This was greeted by the usual protests of the permissive civil libertarians. In the 13th century St. Thomas Aquinas gave us an inspired diagnosis of the problem: "Impurity leads inevitably to violence." Five simple words which explain the whole phenomenon.

The Maoris, who now number 12% of the population, have been successful in their claims to lands which were confiscated during the Maori Wars of 1860-70. Last year they also claimed the atmosphere up to the stratosphere over the whole country, which would have given them control of all radio and TV. This claim failed but there is now another unusual one. In the Bay of Islands there is an uninhabited towering rock with a huge natural arch over the sea. This is large enough to allow 60-foot tourist launches to sail through the "Hole in the Rock". The Maoris are claiming air and sea rights to this interesting area and have charged one operator about \$½m. a year for exclusive boating access. The issue is to be tested in Court.

The \$NZ is now so weak that this beautiful country provides bargain holidays for American colleagues. Come on down during the northern winter!

—H. P. Dunn, M.D.,
Auckland, New Zealand