

responsibility for feudal reform to the Scottish Law Commission. Instead, its inquiries have addressed the emotive issue of largescale land ownership. The possession of sweeping Scottish

exacerbating divisions between land owners and tenants, but shows that the winning of party political advantage in this emotive issue has become as covetous and expedient as the Clearances ever were.

## RELATIVE TRUST

### Disturbing allegations of 'backdoor' euthanasia

Doctors today need to be as expert in ethics as anatomy. Fine judgments about the balance between relieving pain and preserving life are among the most difficult they have to face. Confronted with an elderly man who writhes in agony, a doctor might well feel it necessary to sedate him. Some doctors, however, are accused today of seeing sedation as more than just a temporary relief from pain.

Patients' children have noted that their parents have suffered from dehydration after sedation, and then died from an infection. The cry has been raised that doctors are allowing "backdoor euthanasia". Physicians argue they have simply been trying to ease suffering. As we report, there is a disturbing trend of such cases in Britain's hospitals. A thorough investigation of these deaths and clear guidance for doctors on the use of sedatives is essential if the medical profession is to avoid accusations of allowing doctors to play God with their patients.

While doctors treating patients in a persistent vegetative state must refer their case to the courts before switching off any life support system or denying them food and water, doctors whose patients have

common illnesses are left to "exercise their clinical judgment". Some, it seems, sedate their patients and deprive them of food and water — allegedly without the patient's authorisation or that of his or her family. If a patient dies, the death certificate will commonly state that the cause of death was the underlying medical condition, not dehydration. This lack of regulation and transparency must be addressed.

The British Medical Association is currently consulting its members on the guidelines surrounding this practice. It should recommend greater clarity in the way doctors make decisions about a patient's treatment, and how they communicate that decision to the patient or his family. If doctors are expected to refer a case of patient in a permanent vegetative state to the courts, why should they not be expected to do the same for other patients?

Yet this debate must not obscure the more crucial question. Why were doctors sedating their patients? There appear to be a multitude of reasons, depending on the specific circumstances. Whatever the case, the BMA should decide whether it is ethically right to help nature to take its course.

The point, surely, is that standards are stricter now, and that Mandelson's conduct as a minister was in breach of guidelines which his Government had endorsed, and which his party had assured the electorate it would observe if elected.

Yours faithfully,  
WILLIAM HAMILTON,  
Pine Cottage, Fernhurst,  
Haslemere, Surrey GU27 3EE.  
January 4.

### Redstarts stop Dome?

From Dr David Carvel  
Sir, How delightful it was to read of the humble and endangered black redstart threatening to halt work on the Millennium Dome (report, January 5). I am unsure if Lord Falconer of Thoroton would be the best person to deal with this sensitively.

Is it not poignant that little black redstarts could hold up a massive white elephant?

Yours faithfully,  
DAVID CARVEL,  
13 Edgemont Street,  
Shawlands, Glasgow G41 3EH.  
carvel@compuserve.com  
January 5.

### Business letters, page 25

Letters to the Editor should carry a daytime telephone number. They may be sent to a fax number — 0171-782 5046.  
e-mail to: [letters@the-times.co.uk](mailto:letters@the-times.co.uk)

to "escaping from the X-craft and making for the surface".

The explosive charges that one dropped beneath the keel of one's target were fitted with time-clocks affording up to an eight-hour delay

### Addressing postcodes

From Mr M. G. Harman  
Sir, Why should addresses contain more than the postcode, asks Mr Ray Perkins (letter, December 28; see also letters, January 1)? The simple answer is redundancy.

A single error in any character in a postcode will generally be correctable only with great difficulty, if at all, whereas clerical errors in ordinary addresses are often corrected subconsciously without even being noticed.

Yours sincerely,  
MICHAEL HARMAN,  
Holmwood, 37 Upper Park Road,  
Camberley, Surrey GU15 2EG.  
January 2.

### From Dr Tony Pearson

Sir, Mr Perkins will be pleased to know that I routinely use just a name and postcode on envelopes, sometimes with the first line of an address. The Post Office never fails to deliver.

Still, postcodes can be unnecessarily lengthy. I once sent a postcard from the United States bearing a friend's name and the address: 10W, UK. It reached its destination.

Yours etc,  
TONY PEARSON,  
Poplar Farm, IP31 3SL.

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