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Book review

Reviving Primary Care. A US-UK Comparison

J. FRY, D. LIGHT, J. RODNICK, P. ORTON (EDS.), 155 pp., Radcliffe Medical Press, Oxford, 1995, ISBN 1-85775-001-2, £17.50.

The authors of this book conclude that the cure of the United States' health care system should be found in the British NHS. It seems, however, that this conclusion was their starting point, rather than the result of careful study. In the preface, they open by stating: "Unashamedly this is a biased book! It is biased toward our thesis that primary care is the essential foundation for any cost-effective health care system", and in their view, the British system is "... the best primary care system in the West". So, the readership has been warned that this is not just a comparison of two health care systems, as the subtitle suggests, but that it has a message as well.

The book starts with two general chapters respectively dealing with choices and dilemmas of health policy, the concepts of health and illness and responsibilities for health care and with the features by which health care systems can be characterised. The UK health care system is described in chapter 3 with a history of the NHS, structure and financing of services, manpower, training and income and the reorganisation of the NHS in the 1990s. Chapter 4 is devoted to the US health care system, with competition and minimal government planning interference as core elements and the wide variation in the provision of services and the absence of overall co-ordination. There, the position of general practice is weak and community nursing and teamwork are unknown; the patchwork of financing results in many problems; managed care options are discussed as possible solutions. In chapter 5, titled 'Primary Care', the authors explain the principles and content of primary care and its role in a health care system. Roles and competences of primary care providers, in particular doctors, are explained as well as criteria and conditions for achieving good primary care.

The chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to primary health care in the UK and the US, respectively. Chapter 6 starts with the historical development of primary care in the UK and how GPs achieved their current position and then deals with aspects of costs and income, manpower planning in general practice and the relationship of GPs with specialists and the hospital sector. Finally, insight is given in the workload and the nature of demand and activities in general practice. Chapter 7 also starts with a historical overview of the growth of specialisation in the US and the difficult proliferation of family practice in the medical schools. Since primary care is a vague concept in the US in which various specialities have a role, differences among these specialities are described, in particular pediatricians, general internists, obstetricians, gynaecologists and family practitioners. The authors conclude that there are a shortage of primary care doctors and that a national workforce planning is needed, all the more since there is an increasing demand for family practitioners in the various managed care schemes. Compared to subspecialists, family practitioners generate

lower costs. In the first chapter, the authors launch a model for primary care in the US that could both bring the costs down to less than 10% of the GNP and improve the quality of care. The model is strongly primary care based with an integration of general medicine, community nursing, public health and various other community services. The authors plea for a less specialised and decentralised system of care, with a referral system and patients registered with a doctor and a system of financing which is comparable to the British fund holding practices.

The book provides useful practical information on the organisation of the two health care systems; in particular, the historical development, the role of GPs and FPs and consequences of recent reforms for the roles and activities of professionals. The need for change in the American system has been convincingly described. It seems, however, that the authors have not been equally critical in their review of both health care systems. Against the extensively described shortcomings of the American system, the British NHS is portrayed very positively, while, for instance, there could be reason for concern about the consequences of GP fundholding for the doctor-patient relationship. A more critical reflection is also desirable in chapters 1 and 5 on health care and primary care. In modern society with its high mobility, especially in the cities, there is a big gap between the warm ideals of primary care and real life. A crucial question is to which extent the proposed cure for the American system is realistic. Paradigms on health care are extremely different in the US and the UK. It is not likely that community based low specialised health care, run by newly established local or regional health councils, are acceptable in a country where even much less radical reforms have been rejected. The contrast between the US and the UK system is so sharp that applicable lessons can hardly be drawn from the comparison.

Finally, some comments on the structure of the book. Unfortunately, there is a lot of overlapping information and unnecessary repetition. This is partly due to the sequence of topics in chapters 2 to 7. Health care is addressed in general terms in chapter 2 and then again in two separate chapters for the UK and the US specifically. Likewise, there is another set of three chapters on primary care. Besides, the book lacks accuracy. Titles of sections are not always a good reflection of the content; most summaries are not summaries of the preceding chapter. It is not always clear why topics are dealt with in a certain context. The use of references is insufficient and messy.

It may be concluded with the authors that it is a biased book. It is more a pamphlet than a well balanced study. This may not be an excuse, however, for the observed shortcomings.

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- Hospital Acquired Infection. R.M. Plowman, N. Graves, J.A. Office of Health Economics, London, 56 pp., 1997, ISBN 0473-8837. £7.50.
- Improving the Performance of Health Centres in District Health Systems. Report of a WHO Study Group. WHO, Geneva, 64 pp., 1997, ISBN 92-4-120869-4. Sw.fr. 14.
- Long-Term Care. Federal, State, and Private Options for the Future. R.C. O'Brien, M.T. Flannery. The Haworth Press, Binghampton, NY, 290 pp., 1997, ISBN 0-7890-0261-2. US\$24.95 (outside USA, Canada, Mexico: US\$30.00).
- Nursing in Europe: A Resource for Better Health. J. Salvage, S. Heijnen. WHO Regional Publications, European Series, No. 74, 278 pp., 1997, ISBN 92-890-1338-9. Sw.fr. 69.
- The History of Health Insurance in Greece: The Nettle Governments Failed to Grasp. D. Venieris. The London School of Economics and Political Science, Discussion Paper No. 9, London, 55 pp., 1997.