Book reviews

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Almost all developed countries seem to be facing the same conundrum about the future of their health system. The central challenge for policy makers is a simple one; how do we create an effective and equitable service, which is acceptable to those who use it and at the same time doesn’t damage our economy? In What Makes a Good Healthcare System, Alan Gillies attempts to provide an answer. Few will be surprised that such an ambitious question doesn’t have a simple answer but Gillies has nevertheless produced an entertaining and informative account of the issues.

The book draws comparisons between the underlying values and policy drivers, and their practical consequences, in three countries, the UK, Australia and Canada. International comparisons are popular at the moment, but too often meaningless conclusions are drawn by comparing apples with oranges. Thankfully, by carefully drawing out the common challenges and analysing the different solutions being adopted by policy makers in the three countries, Gillies doesn’t fall into this trap.

Several of the issues raised are particularly relevant to current reforms in the UK. The Australians have struggled for many years with the balance between public and private provision of services. In Canada, primary care is at the core of the health system reforms, but it is proving difficult to turn the political rhetoric of a primary care-led service into real change on the ground. In both countries, the role of general practice within the primary care system is exercising the minds of those who want a high quality, accessible and co-ordinated service but who also want to break the monopoly that GPs have traditionally held. Also in both countries, the independent contractor role of the GP is being challenged on one side by the expansion of salaried posts, and on the other side by the sale of independent small businesses to large corporations.

There is a strong emphasis in the book on the role of primary care within the broader health system, and this is to be welcomed. So too are the attempts by Gillies to draw out the values underlying the health systems in the three countries. In an age of pragmatism, this is of course a difficult task, but the extent to which values drive policy in Canada (where they are very up-front), the UK (where values are made explicit only when it is convenient to make them so) and Australia (where values seem to be either absent or very implicit), makes interesting reading.

Gillies over-plays some of the differences between health systems and in part this might reflect the far from systematic approach he adopted to understanding what is happening in each country. Perhaps he also over-emphasizes the importance of values and political ideology and under-estimates the importance of political expediency in determining health policy. Overall, however, this book makes a useful contribution to the broader debate about health system reform.

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This book is designed for the student market, providing a brief overview of common paediatric presentations and problems. The cartoon representation for each topic permits the student to take with ease the essential factors—be it examination routine or potential differential diagnoses.

The book is divided into parts covering all the essential areas of paediatric examination and a broad look at the types of problems encountered. Each topic is allocated a page, which makes finding the information quick and easy, but the text associated with each diagram often repeats the same information. Each section has ‘key points’ bringing home the most salient points. It is well ordered and reasonably logical, apart from the pages on short stature being inserted before the section on failure to thrive, and the book opening with a section on special schooling that might be better kept to the end chapter dealing with disability.

The tabloid representation pays dividends in certain areas—vaccinations, developmental assessment, screening and surveillance schedules are clear and the information is easily obtainable. Sadly, the pictorial representations are neither complete nor accurate. For example, the investigation of the unconscious child fails to recommend either an MSU or metabolic disease screen, and hypertension can hardly be considered a