This book is much more fascinating and compelling than would first be thought from its title. Indeed it could be three books: a history of health services research in the UK, with particular reference to St Thomas’ Social Medicine and Health Services Research Unit in London; a guide to health services research, its method and uses; and an autobiography of Professor Holland showing his commitment over five decades to the improvement of health service policy and practice. However, these themes have all been skilfully crafted into one very readable book, with each strand informing and strengthening the others.

Professor Holland is in a unique position to bring all these themes together. He not only led an outstanding research team, but he has contributed nationally and internationally over many years. Whereas the main description is of health services research (HSR) in the UK context, there are examples from the USA, and lessons are learned from the history to provide insights to the contribution in the future to improving health services. Long before the term ‘evidence based’ entered common usage, Professor Holland showed the importance of evidence-based health policy and the importance of collaboration with both those who commission such research and those who put it into practice. The failures to either understand the evidence or to apply it are well illustrated. The clear and critical analyses of the HSR examples, and of the policy responses quoted, are what we all expect from Professor Holland. No one else could have produced such insight based on personal experience over such a prolonged period. They make fascinating reading. Readers from all countries will recognize the issues and, although the examples may mainly relate to the UK, the lessons from this work will apply to any country.

Professor Holland describes in detail the problems of persuading those in authority of the need for research, of the failings of those who should have known better and of the effect of powerful intervention by those in senior positions. For those of us who have been involved, albeit in a smaller way, many memories are awakened and new insights are provided to what may have been seen at the time as inexplicable policy decisions. Thus, a small number of more senior people will simply enjoy reading this.

A more important and a larger group of readers will be those who are currently concerned with pursuing health services research. The history, both of the academic developments over this period and of the influence of government policy, is essential reading if present day researchers are to understand the current settings for health services research. At the same time as the history, there is authoritative and detailed information on what constitutes health services research and the importance of a multidisciplinary approach. This book should be regarded as required reading for all those involved in or contemplating careers in this area. Not only are the essential requirements of HSR laid out, but there is also the warning that this area is intensely political and often challenges issues that are of a deeply ideological nature.

Today, when all aspects of health care are under the public spotlight, politicians and those with executive responsibility for health policy are advised to read this book and to learn from the clear messages that it contains. In his preface Professor Holland says: ‘Sound HSR is absolutely central to the effective functioning of any modern health service. I hope this book will show how HSR in the UK has developed over time and how it can illuminate and improve health service policy and practice’.

If his book is read, and if the evidence from it is applied, then his hope will be achieved.

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