Book Reviews


Danny Dorling’s ingenious portrayal of individuals, families and communities living along the 32 stops of the Central Line of the London Underground brings to life the social inequalities embedded within and across London. In West Ruislip, the Central Line’s westernmost stop, a young couple with dream of a better future for their baby in neighbouring Ruislip Gardens, where crime rates are lower and GCSE results higher. A few stops eastward, a boy calculates the impact of housing benefit cuts on the number of items of clothing his mother will buy him. In Central London, a retired couple contemplates the relative merits of their Bank Station flat and their additional homes in Guildford and Nice. And so Dorling’s vivid account of social, economic, educational and health inequalities affecting the lives of Londoners continues. Regional and geographical discrepancies in health and other outcomes are old news in Public Health, but this volume adds flesh to the bones of inequality. It depicts with imagination, sensitivity and conviction the lived realities of individuals living side-by-side but worlds apart. Highly recommended reading for all Public Health professionals and anyone with an interest in social patterns of health.

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The graphic tale of how ‘Obamacare’ was won

Like any other important part of human existence, health has been a regular subject for cartoonists down the ages. The depraved images of Hogarth’s ‘Gin Lane’ of 1751, the cows’ heads bursting out of patients that have been inoculated in Gillray’s ‘The Cow-pock’ of 1802 and the Punch cartoon ‘A Court for King Cholera’ from 1852 are well-known commentaries on major health issues and, it could be argued, all had an effect on public opinion of the day. Perhaps much more so than prose arguments ever could.

In recent years few issues have been of more importance than health sector reform. It has been close to the centre of contemporary political debate on both sides of the Atlantic. Not surprisingly, the uniquely polarized views on the Patient Protection and Affordable Healthcare Act in the USA have produced a rash of books seeking to explain, defend or discredit what is, from any point of view, a momentous change in the healthcare system. In one refreshingly accessible account of healthcare reform the authors have used cartoons taken from newspapers and magazines to illustrate the complex twists and turns of the healthcare reform process.

The authors have concentrated on the past 30 years of struggle for healthcare reform in the USA, starting with the unsuccessful efforts of Bill Clinton to bring about universal health coverage. They do however acknowledge the roots of the reform movement stretching back to the beginning of the 20th century and how it was influenced, as indeed was Lloyd George in Britain, by the system introduced in Germany by Bismarck. Most of the book is devoted to the development of what has become known as ‘Obamacare’ and the twists and turns of the policy development process that eventually resulted in the Act being passed by Congress.

The narrative is very clearly laid out in the text that accompanies the hundreds of cartoons from the skilled pens of 27 separate cartoonists. It tells a story, not just of the winning of the reform battle but of the defeats and compromises along the way. The cartoons give a graphic flavor to the text that is both acutely observed and, at times, razor sharp. Major political figures such as the Clintons, Senator Baucus and President Obama appear repeatedly in the drawings. But the importance of background figures such as Ted Kennedy, who indefatigably championed health reform for more than 30 years and died in 2009, is emphasized.

The book is published by the American Public Health Association Press and the first author is the association’s Executive Director. One would therefore assume that, in