Health Sociology Review

Book Review

Health care and public policy: an Australian analysis. 4th edition

by George Palmer and Stephanie Short


Anna Kemp
Research Associate, Centre for Health Services Research, School of Population Health, The University of Western Australia, Crawley WA

Palmer and Short's highly successful Health Care and Public Policy: an Australian analysis (2010) is now in its 4th edition. This text aims to introduce students, clinicians and policymakers to the 'political, economic and social context within which health policies develop' (p xxv). To this end Palmer and Short draw on a range of disciplines including sociology, economics, epidemiology and public health to analyse the Australian health system and the politics of health policymaking.

This edition covers the major policy issues arising since the previous edition in 2000. The last decade has seen the end of 11 years of Coalition government and a new Labour government, (with a consequent shift in the ideology underpinning health policy), substantial changes to private health funding and the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC) inquiry and report. This edition provides comprehensive analyses of these developments, updated literature and statistics, and canvasses reforms that may arise from the 2009 NHHRC report. Also new to the 4th edition are thoughtful discussion questions and suggested further reading for each chapter.

The text is broadly divided into two sections. First, Chapters 1-3 provide a conceptual framework for understanding Australia's healthcare system and policies. This includes discussion of the organisation and financing of health services and the stages of health policy formation. Chapter 3 provides a particularly useful theoretical framework for understanding health policy perspectives, making the text approachable for readers unfamiliar with political science and sociological perspectives on health care.

The second section of the book provides an analysis of contemporary issues facing the Australian health system and issues likely to drive future health policy. Chapters 4-9 comprehensively discuss a range of diverse issues including health funding, hospital organisation and regulation, health workforce composition, new medical technologies and disease prevention. Chapter 10 summarises the significant recommendations from the NHHRC final report. Palmer and Short also identify what they view as the report's significant omissions drawing particular attention to geographic disparities in health service provision and inequalities in healthcare funding. Finally, Chapter 11 raises challenging questions about the likely future drivers of health reform including Australia's aging population and the proliferation of medical technology.

The text provides a persuasive case for substantial change to the Australia health system. Policy reforms including change to health service finance and management arrangements
between the Commonwealth and State governments, and increases in expenditure on disease prevention and health promotion are considered. Palmer and Short caution the reader against 'false prophets' forwarding simple solutions to health reform. Instead they argue that successful reform will require a critical appraisal of the likely benefits and costs for all health stakeholders so that the best set of compromises can be reached.

A major strength of this text is the integration of sociological perspectives with the discussion of medical and economic outcomes. Issues of power and influence are highlighted throughout the text, with readers encouraged to consider the 'interests' of all stakeholders involved with policy formation. Palmer and Short argue that some groups have greater influence than others in setting the policy agenda and have more to gain by maintaining the status quo. They present evidence for considerable inequity in the health system, arguing that the poorer and sicker members of the community are disadvantaged by current arrangements: 'The reliance on private health insurance, where contributions are not related to income, and the large out-of-pocket payments for many medical and dental services and for pharmaceuticals are specific manifestations of how we deviate from a fair distribution of the cost of supporting our healthcare system' (p. 354).

This text brings together a range of perspectives and presents thoughtful and comprehensive discussion of contemporary health policy issues.