

Book review

IMPROVING HEALTH CARE SAFETY AND QUALITY: RELUCTANT REGULATORS

By Judith Healy

2011. Ashgate Publishing Limited. ISBN 0754676447

This book is a most valuable addition to the Australian safety and quality in healthcare literature. Starting with a punchy, balanced yet somewhat unsettling preface, Judith Healy explores her thesis that 'improving healthcare involves multiple regulators and multiple strategies, in other words networked governance' through the ten chapters of this substantial book.

As would be expected this is a well-researched, well-written, scholarly piece of work. It is no quick page-turner, it requires the reader to think and reflect, while being informed, stimulated and challenged throughout. For those with a deep interest in safety and quality in healthcare, whether they have policy, board, executive, clinician or consumer perspectives, this is a most valuable read. Others will find it rewarding, even if they read chapters, or sections of chapters to pursue their particular interest. Of assistance to all readers is the logical chapter layout, each ending with the conclusion that acts as an executive summary and a boon to the time-challenged.

The author draws on her international knowledge, study and research to put the Australian situation into a broader context. She demonstrates an understanding of all participants in the Australian scene and no one is spared critical analysis. The concept of 'deference regulators' (Chapter 3, Regulatory actors) who see people as 'amoral calculators' is most salutary, although given the description, I doubt many readers would identify themselves as such!

In spite of this critical analysis, Judith Healy clearly understands the reality and complexity of modern healthcare and understands the role and nature of the key players, as well demonstrated in Chapter 2, 'How safe is healthcare?'

Her views on medical organisations (Chapter 4, 'Regulating the health professions') are sure to be controversial and to stimulate debate.

Most doctors would regard the comments about them in this chapter 'signing up for conference points in a desirable tourist site', though, as unnecessary and hopefully outdated cheap shot.

The author devotes a chapter to safety culture and safety systems (Chapter 5), the inclusion of which is both essential and helpful. References to patient-centred care throughout reflect well on current thinking. The text is current, an achievement given the fast pace of change and development of events in Australia recently. There are some situations where events have overtaken the text, such as the conclusion of the Patel trial, the implementation of the Australian Health Practitioners Registration Agency and the most recent changes to health reform. Such are the hazards of writing text books!

The book ends by discussing the important concepts of trust and transparency in some detail, an excellent way to finish, and with an optimistic observation that can be missing in discourses on the safety and quality of healthcare. Judith Healy writes 'The amount of activity in the short space of a decade is very impressive. The intention is to ensure that healthcare is of a high standard and as safe as possible – which is good news for patients' (Chapter 10, 'Responsive regulation: trust and transparency').

In short, I highly recommend this book.

Declaration: Judith Healy has undertaken contracted work for the Australian Council for Safety and Quality in Health Care. This work has been presented to the successor body, the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, of which I am Chief Executive.

Christopher J. Baggoley

Chief Executive – Australian Commission on
Safety and Quality in Health Care