

Book review

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND HEALTH: HOSPITALS, POLITICS AND HEALTH POLICY IN NEW ZEALAND

M. J. Laugesen and R. Gauld
Otago University Press, 2012.
ISBN 798 1 877578 27 4. 214 pages.

This relatively short book (175 pages of text) is an ambitious account of the sweep of democratic governance in New Zealand health services from 1925 to 2008. Unlike most other countries, New Zealand has persisted with a local as well as national approach to democratic governance in health and so provides a case study of the interplay of local and national forces over the course of a century. The authors are well positioned to provide this overview: Robin Gauld has been researching health governance for several decades and Miriam Laugesen's PhD thesis canvassed the upheaval of the 1990s in New Zealand when efforts to create a market-led health system challenged the long-held views on the nature of local health governance and the relationship between the centre and the periphery.

Despite the focus on New Zealand the authors provide an international context for their analysis. Chapter 2 briefly reviews the situation in several Western countries. This is of considerable comparative interest in re-emphasising the 'differentness' of New Zealand, but little is made of international comparisons either throughout the text or in the concluding 'Lessons' chapter except for useful reference to Britain and the United States. The body of the book pursues a chronological narrative of the political forces and policy that influence health governance over key periods: the creation of the welfare state and its consequences for hospital governance in particular (Chapter 3); the challenge to local control by a Labour government in the 1970s and efforts at more modest reform by its National successor (Chapter 4); a strong push by Labour in the 1980s toward regionalisation of health (Chapter 5); the introduction by the new National government (1980–96) of a market approach and removal of

elected boards (Chapter 6); the retreat by a coalition government from the excesses of the market approach (Chapter 7); and finally a changed direction after 1999 that saw a strong public health and primary care orientation to health governance (Chapter 8). Although chronological, and with a strong narrative, these chapters also provide good analysis and reflection on events. The side headings in the chapters ensure that the high level of detail can be navigated with relative ease and the momentum of the 'yarn' maintained.

I found the Introduction (Chapter 1) and the Conclusion (Chapter 8) particularly interesting. Chapter 1 provided an overview of events, including a table that listed reform episodes, policy recommendations and outcomes (magic for students!). It also reviewed the big questions of the importance of governance, the popular models and the role of communities. Chapter 8 set out five 'lessons' from the historical experience that included a discussion of the nature of representation and its value.

This book makes a good contribution to resources on New Zealand health governance. It will be of value to students and to non-specialist academics interested in these issues and to academics with a specialist interest in health governance wishing to understand the peculiarities of the New Zealand system. The book makes what could be arcane and dry material accessible, and overall is a 'good read'.

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