

Not Our Problem: A novel

Ian Cowan

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One day in the early 1990s I was a Junior Research Fellow sitting in the Research Unit of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners in Dunedin when a head popped around the door. *“Do you have time for a quick consultation?”* it said. Flattered that anyone would want to consult with me, I welcomed the head and its attached body into the room and asked how I could help. *“Well,”* the young man said, *“we were just wondering how you’d feel if we did away with pharmacists. We think that would save money.”* I reacted to this introduction with a stunned silence. The young man explained *“GPs obviously know all about drugs because they prescribe them. Why can’t they just dispense them as well? Why do we need pharmacists?”* Picking myself off the floor and pulling myself together, I deflected his questions and asked who he was. He proudly told me that he was a Senior Manager in the local Transitional Health Authority offices, having secured his appointment a couple of weeks previously, as a newly minted economics graduate.

This is the context of Ian Cowan’s novel. It is a novel. It is also a telling commentary on the strangest of times in New Zealand when, for a few years, political ideology and economic theory overwhelmed professionalism and common sense. Therefore it is also a cautionary tale. Reading the book, so much of the story seems a bit far-fetched but to those of us who lived through those times it will completely resonate: not a single extreme ‘fictional’ scenario seems unlikely (given the times). Backing the whole story up, and unusual

for a novel, is a detailed bibliography providing references and explanations for statements in the body of the book.

The story is about Stephen Cassidy, a young surgical registrar who decides to abandon the exhaustion and despair of a dysfunctional clinical environment in a town called Paxton, which bears some similarity to Christchurch where author Ian Cowan has worked as a radiologist since 1984. Like all the best novels (in my view) a thread of romance is woven into the narrative of the young Cassidy, as a reason for some of the actions taken by the main protagonist. This is hardly a romantic novel though. Sometimes it reads like a comedy. Ultimately, it beds down in the political fiction genre.

Cassidy leaves his position as surgical trainee seeking to make a real difference to patient care by the unusual route of seeking employment as medical advisor to the new government health agency. He is the lone medic in an agency tasked with implementing an impossible set of targets set to align with an economic theory that bears no relationship to any reality of health care provision. That, apparently, is the problem with the reality – not the theory. Like a fish out of water Cassidy finds himself in a culture of ‘revenue losing units’ (patients), ‘commercial sensitivity’ (secrets), ‘scenarios’ (how we want things to happen), and ‘offshore consultants’ (because nobody in New Zealand knows how to run its health system). His colleagues and bosses rapidly change. He struggles to survive and ultimately

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weighs one type of insanity against another and leaves New Zealand, as so many young New Zealanders do.

I could have read a longer book. *Not Our Problem* has 248 pages, plus appendices. The book is very readable but there are times when the details seen

in the best novels are sacrificed for the brevity that typifies the best medical communications. There is an edge to this writing that makes readers feel it could only have been written by someone with 'insider' experience – and that is also a marker of a great novel. It is the author's first novel. I am looking forward to reading his next one.