

Book review

Tovey, P. editor. 2000: *Contemporary primary care – the challenges of change*. Buckingham: Open University Press. 192 pp. £18.99. ISBN: 0335 2000 95.

As a deterrent against academic analysis, the hectic pace of policy development in primary care could hardly be more effective. Whilst individual, short-term and centrally sponsored project evaluations have proliferated, comprehensive and above all independent assessments of contemporary primary care have been notably scarce in recent times.

Accordingly, this book, that Philip Tovey has put together with colleagues who have a special interest in primary care at Leeds University and elsewhere, is especially welcome. It is a safe bet that within a year it will be on the reading lists of every institution in the UK, where 'primary care' is taught as a subject that now reaches well beyond the confines of general practice and individual professional disciplines.

Contemporary Primary Care is a valiant attempt to provide a rigorous and rounded, if selective, view of current organizational, service delivery and research issues. Given the general desire to make sense of 'modernization' and its effects, these are attractive if ambitious terms of reference. The writers succeed in the editor's stated aim of 'bringing together critical and thought-provoking pieces on a diverse set of issues of relevance to the evolving shape and character of primary care.' For example, Section Two on 'Practice' issues contains some real gems. Steve Iliffe's chapter on 'Commissioning for Older People' represents not simply a wonderfully well-written radical essay, but also highly pertinent applied research for primary care groups and trusts. Whilst the book is deliberately eclectic in its approach, the four chapters in the

'Practice' section do benefit from having the thematic perspective of special needs groups and the impact on them of contemporary developments.

The sense that the book may also be a little over-ambitious in its remit is conveyed by the subtitle, 'The Challenges of Change.' The research section covers the inappropriateness of randomized controlled trials in counselling evaluations, the need to incorporate inter-practice analyses into data capture arrangements, and the internal and external interfaces of conventional and complementary medicine. Each is important, of course, but perhaps not top of the research agenda at a time when national policy is affording primary care organizations the lead local responsibilities for promoting public health, combining community services and commissioning secondary care.

Nevertheless, overall the book makes a valuable contribution to what still remains a sparse subject literature. It is refreshing to read a text which promotes the cause of primary care but does not rely simply on central documentation as its theological source. Several chapters draw heavily on historic trends to illustrate the extent to which primary care has developed as much as a reaction to national policy as a response. In his 'Postscript', Tovey revisits his introductory theme of primary care in its diversity often developing 'independent of political initiatives.' 'It is what is actually going on in primary care that should take centre stage,' he writes. Amen to that.

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