

Book Review

The graphic tale of how ‘Obamacare’ was won

The Quest for Health Reform: A Satirical History. Georges C. Benjamin, Theodore M. Brown, Susan Ladwig and Elyse Berkman. American Public Health Association, 2013, ISBN: 978-0-87553-020-8.

Like any other important part of human existence, health has been a regular subject for cartoonists down the ages. The depraved images of Hogarth’s ‘Gin Lane’ of 1751, the cows’ heads bursting out of patients that have been inoculated in Gillray’s ‘The Cow-pock’ of 1802 and the Punch cartoon ‘A Court for King Cholera’ from 1852 are well-known commentaries on major health issues and, it could be argued, all had an effect on public opinion of the day. Perhaps much more so than prose arguments ever could.

In recent years few issues have been of more importance than health sector reform. It has been close to the centre of contemporary political debate on both sides of the Atlantic. Not surprisingly, the uniquely polarized views on the Patient Protection and Affordable Healthcare Act in the USA have produced a rash of books seeking to explain, defend or discredit what is, from any point of view, a momentous change in the healthcare system. In one refreshingly accessible account of healthcare reform the authors have used cartoons taken from newspapers and magazines to illustrate the complex twists and turns of the healthcare reform process.

The authors have concentrated on the past 30 years of struggle for healthcare reform in the USA, starting with the unsuccessful efforts of Bill Clinton to bring about universal health coverage. They do however acknowledge the roots of the reform movement stretching back to the beginning of the 20th century and how it was influenced, as indeed was Lloyd George in Britain, by the system introduced in Germany by

Bismarck. Most of the book is devoted to the development of what has become known as ‘Obamacare’ and the twists and turns of the policy development process that eventually resulted in the Act being passed by Congress.

The narrative is very clearly laid out in the text that accompanies the hundreds of cartoons from the skilled pens of 27 separate cartoonists. It tells a story, not just of the winning of the reform battle but of the defeats and compromises along the way. The cartoons give a graphic flavor to the text that is both acutely observed and, at times, razor sharp. Major political figures such as the Clintons, Senator Baucus and President Obama appear repeatedly in the drawings. But the importance of background figures such as Ted Kennedy, who indefatigably championed health reform for more than 30 years and died in 2009, is emphasized.

The book is published by the American Public Health Association Press and the first author is the association’s Executive Director. One would therefore assume that, in line with their policy, the book would be firmly pro-reform. Indeed it is, but anti-reform cartoons are given plenty of prominence and both sides of the various tussles that took place are well reflected. This production suits many people’s learning style and its appreciation of the place of humour and ridicule in healthcare debates is a welcome antidote to the dryness of much analytical commentary.

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doi:10.1093/pubmed/fdt089