

## Book reviews

**Wilson, T.**, ed. 1999: *The PCG development guide*. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press, 264 pp. £23.50, ISBN 1 85775 332 1.

This is a welcome addition to the small range of books and resources available for the induction and development of boards and members of primary care groups (PCGs). As individual members recognize that PCGs are a leap in the dark, anything which will speed up the development of knowledge and understanding is welcome.

The book consists of a set of 13 readings authored by 15 different contributors on the wide range of roles and responsibilities of PCGs. The subjects covered are general management issues (such as management, human resources, education and training, communication with stakeholders and information requirements) and issues specific to the PCG (such as commissioning, clinical governance, health needs assessment and HImPs, working with other agencies, public involvement, and contributions from nurses, fundholders and commissioning GPs). The latter chapters are particularly helpful for those who need a brief overview of specific PCG roles.

There is an acknowledgement in the book that the PCG is strategic and long term, engaging with a wide range of stakeholders to develop health improvement programmes, but there is also a realism in demonstrating some of the reasonably 'quick hits' that could be achieved by PCGs. In this, however, I thought the closing chapter was disappointing. It gives examples of how primary care commissioning can work, and so helps to raise the hopes of those who may feel that these new-fangled structures cannot possibly deliver anything positive, but the range is limited and the treatment is shallow, with little evidence base.

A particular strength of the book is the development of an understanding of the rich benefits to be derived from effective communication, networking with stakeholders and learning from each other and from previous strategic developments. It also lifts the mind from day-to-day operational health and

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social care, to understand the larger role of the PCG, not just as a purchaser with limited choice, but also as a commissioner which specifies effective, efficient services within the available resources. One chapter on the implications for primary care of PCGs started with a parochial GP perspective on practice allocations and prescribing, but took off later as it dealt with *Primary Care – the Future*.

The index is good, but the chapter references and further reading are of variable quality and often fail to mention the increasing evidence base in this organizational field. In a reader like this, such features are essential for those who want to go beyond the primer stage, as well as for those who want to be convinced that certain policies and organizational developments have worked elsewhere.

So, are PCGs good or bad? Tim Wilson, the editor, says, 'This is unimportant, they are here and everyone in primary care will be involved'. He continues, 'they not only offer great potential, but will also involve a considerable amount of work and a journey into uncharted territory'. We all agree with that, don't we?!

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**Malin, N., Manthorpe, J., Race, D. and Wilmot, S.** 1999: *Community care for nurses and the caring professions*. Buckingham: Open University Press. 224 pp. £15.99 (PB), £45.00 (HB). ISBN 0 335 19670 5.

This textbook is in the series entitled 'Social Science for Nurses and the Caring Professions' edited by Pamela Abbott. It focuses on policy and practice issues associated with community care,

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and the authors have divided it into four sections. The first section, on the policy context, outlines historical developments between 1957 and 1988 and then the reforms of the 1990s. The following section contains two chapters that focus on the conceptual and ideological underpinnings of community care. The third section presents the perspectives of users and carers, and the last section is oriented towards the role of professionals in community care.

Much of the first section covers familiar territory, particularly the developments in policy and legislation that followed the Griffiths Report of 1988. The second edition is more interesting and is built around a Wolfensbergian 'schemata' that summarizes the interrelated cultural and political influences that affect the development of services. This helps to focus attention on a number of key questions concerning the relationship and potential value conflicts between professional groups and dominant ideologies in wider society. This thesis is illustrated by the recent history of policies regarding learning disability services.

The third section endeavours to present the view from the other side but, given a heavy reliance upon policy-oriented research, it ends up providing the reader with a good review of current frameworks for approaching that perspective. The terms that dominate are 'user', 'empowerment', 'exclusion/inclusion', 'advocacy' and 'carer'. Thus this section presents a professional perspective on working with people using community care services, albeit with a commitment to develop practice which does not further diminish their abilities and prospects. These two chapters reflect a certain recognition of the many diverse situations that confront those working in community care, and the problems entailed in determining the practical aims of such a service.

The final section logically follows by asking

how the various professional groups working in community care 'get their act together'. What is interesting here is the comparative commentaries on the three key groups, namely GPs, nurses and social workers.

The book is organized very much along standard textbook lines, with each chapter having a detailed structure and many headings, and ending with a conclusion, summary, further reading and references. The book as a whole has a rather uneven sprinkling of boxes, and concludes with a glossary and index. Clearly it will be a useful aid to student essay-writers (although it is alarming to find Arber and Gilbert's well-known paper in the journal *Sociology* transformed into a book published by Sage). However, an unfortunate consequence of the textbook format is that the authors do not offer the non-essay-writing reader a critical overview of how the various professional groups are currently engaged in the production of community care.

There are perhaps some missed opportunities in this text. First, there is little discussion of how the lives of users and carers are seriously constrained by issues of income, benefits, charges and housing. In a book that claims to be dealing with the central issues relating to everyday practice, I was surprised to find that housing was not even listed in the index. Secondly, despite the title, there is effectively no reference to the critical role played by some of the other caring professions, such as lawyers, chiropodists and occupational therapists.

Despite these reservations, this will be a useful introductory text for students who are trying to make sense of the diffuse and complex world of community care.

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