

PostScript

BOOK REVIEWS

Ethics, Management and Mythology: Rational Decision Making for Health Service Professionals

Michael Loughlin. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press, 2001, £19.95 (paperback). ISBN 1 85775 574 X

Michael Loughlin is famous (or notorious) in the world of health services management and management theory for his scathing attacks on such concepts as “quality” and “fair rationing”, and on the very idea of an ethics specific to healthcare management. This book brings together much of his thinking on these general themes in the form of a textbook of philosophy aimed at health service professionals, particularly managers.

Loughlin’s explicit aim is to challenge lazy thinking, the mindless use of jargon, and (even more) the deliberate use of “management science” as a sophisticated technique. Sophistry, he reminds us, is the use of rational arguments to persuade one’s audience of the rightness of one’s beliefs or one’s proposals for action, without critical scrutiny of one’s own presuppositions or regard for the truth. Loughlin hopes to engage the reader in the activity of philosophy, which is concerned with the critical examination of assumptions and arguments in order to clear away nonsense, bad arguments, and misleading illusions. Underlying Loughlin’s pedagogical aims is a specific theory of the relationship between the possibility of ethics and the prevailing social and political order.

The health service professional into whose hands this book falls will certainly be greatly irritated by it. It is rude about the role of managers, arrogant about the correctness of

its own analyses, and unduly scathing about the possibility of a genuine social science of organisations. While much of the language of quality management is absurd, he does not justice to its core intention—to seek to care better for one’s patients. Nonetheless, the book achieves its primary aim of making the reader think for him or herself. Many of the targets Loughlin attacks more than merit his criticisms; I particularly enjoyed his skewering of what is wrong with *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and of what is wrong with the idea of “ethical guidelines” and the notion of a professional “ethicist”. There is a gnarly energy and intelligence and anger in the book which make it much the most entertaining and engaging book on ethics that I have read in a long time.

Richard Ashcroft

Leverhulme Senior Lecturer in Medical Ethics,
Imperial College of Science, Technology and
Medicine, London W6 8RP, UK

Stroke Services: Policy and Practice across Europe

Edited by C Wolfe, C McKeivitt, A Rudd. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press, 2002, £24.95, pp 160 (paperback). ISBN 1 85775 455 7

Stroke remains a major cause of death and disability throughout the world. In the UK and elsewhere, care for people with stroke has been shown to vary dramatically in relation to how that care is organised and delivered, and what it achieves. The greatest strength of this book is therefore not so much that it identifies variability across Europe, but that it contains eloquent and practical discussion about the difficulties in carrying out such research and interpreting the findings. The authors also discuss potential advances we need to make in research into stroke and other chronic conditions, across geographical and cultural boundaries.

The majority of chapters follow a similar pattern, first highlighting a particular issue arising in multinational research such as disease registers, economic evaluation, and identifying and defining outcomes that are important to patients. The authors then draw upon the BIOMED-I and BIOMED-II stroke research programmes (both widely reported in the literature) as illustrative case studies. Once this pattern is grasped by the reader it works well, not least because a number of the authors have contributed to multiple chapters thereby keeping a reasonable thematic thread for an edited text. The fact that this book explicitly tackles some of the very important, but sometimes overlooked, issues in both country specific and international epidemiological studies is exciting and valuable.

While we may be part of the way towards identifying and measuring what constitutes “good quality care” and the reasons for variation, this book argues that we have further to

go. A strength of the writing is that it helps the reader take a step outside nation specific assumptions and preconceptions about what “could” and “should” be done. Although reconsideration of our basic assumptions can make for uncomfortable and unsettling reading, it is clearly necessary from time to time if we are truly interested in developing continuous improvement in quality care. The book finishes by arguing that, despite the clear difficulties in doing such research and the resultant need for caution in interpreting findings, international collaborations are possible and can reveal new findings and promote new questions. It is not merely philosophical rhetoric, as many of the experiences outlined in the book provide a useful way forward for others considering such studies or simply trying to make sense of them.

K McPherson

School of Health Professions and Rehabilitation
Sciences, University of Southampton, Southampton
SO17 1BJ, UK

NOTICES

East meets West to improve quality and efficiency of health services

The International Hospital Federation is organising a conference entitled “East meets West to improve quality and efficiency of health services” in Bucharest, Romania on 10–12 April 2002. For further information contact olteanu@kappa.ro or visit the Romanian Hospital Association website www2.cmb.ro/asr.

JCI Summer Practicum

Joint Commission International (JCI) is holding a Summer Practicum on Quality Improvement and Accreditation on 8–12 July 2002 at the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) headquarters building in Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois, USA (25 miles west of Chicago). The aim is to provide healthcare managers and care providers, quality experts, and other healthcare leaders with practical knowledge and skills for healthcare quality evaluation, management, and improvement based on global strategies for local implementation.

The Practicum will include interactive discussion, practical exercises, and case studies that address the international standards for hospitals, development and management of a national accreditation programme, patient safety initiatives, evidence-based clinical best practices, and quality indicators. Two days will be spent observing simulated JCI accreditation surveys in local healthcare organisations.

For further information please contact Jennifer Hill, Manager of International Services, at jhill@jcrinc.com or (001) 630 268 7458.

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