

BOOK REVIEW

HEALTH SERVICES IN SOCIETY, (WORKBOOK 2 - WORKBOOKS IN COMMUNITY HEALTH)

by M Hammond and J Gear, Oxford University Press, 1986

This workbook is the second in a series of three Workbooks In Community Health (Workbook 1: Measuring Community Health; Workbook 2: Promoting Healthy Environments). It is an excellent teaching manual and should be mandatory reading for all health workers. The following are some of its strengths.

The South African health system can only be understood from a political-economic perspective within a certain historical period. The workbook fulfils this requirement admirably and simply. The Brazzaville Declaration - adopted at the first International Conference on Apartheid and Health, convened in 1981 by the World Health Organisation - had concluded that apartheid and health are incompatible. The workbooks scientifically and graphically illustrate this point, and also provide a strategic approach in achieving adequate health.

Style and Format

Secondly, the style and format of the workbook - while difficult to adjust to initially - facilitate a critical and dynamic understanding of health in South Africa. The authors present the scientific evidence, explicitly apply their value system (ie the adequate provision of health by the State for all its people within a democratic society) and then invite the reader to critically participate.

This approach is in stark contrast to the didactic approach based on the narrow biological model of health and disease, buttressed by the "hidden curriculum", which continues to reinforce and perpetuate the class, sexual and racial divisions of our society.

This approach has been strongly endorsed by the South African Association of Medical Education (SAAME) Congress of 1985 and for this reason, the workbooks should occupy a central position in the curriculum of all medical faculties.

The Strategic Approach: Towards a National Health Service

The workbook makes a significant contribution to developing a strategic approach in moving health workers towards a relevant health system.

The workbook repeatedly stresses that an alternative National Health Service (NHS) in the post-apartheid society will not be a product of a few intellectuals or some high sounding resolutions or charters. This NHS will have to be developed organically from within the womb of the present apartheid society. The steps in this dynamic process involve the analysis of the present health and social system, assessing its positive and negative features in the context of the prevailing philosophical/ideological framework.

Next, the correlation and balance of various (class) forces are quantified and evaluated. The attitudes and (class) interests of the medical industry (drug companies etc), the politicians and doctors in relation to the health needs of the majority, are starkly contrasted.

The health worker is then challenged to make ethical and professional choices and to participate in the broad movement towards a democratic NHS.

In summary, the workbook addresses a number of key tasks in the health sector during this transitional period, viz:

- analysis and exposure of the negative effects of apartheid on health
- identifying the obstacles towards health for all
- challenging health workers to redefine their roles and in alliance with other social forces to move towards a NHS within a democratic South Africa.

"It is our aim to stimulate such debate, to encourage health workers to think critically and creatively, and to generate a commitment among concerned South Africans to keep searching for solutions that will positively affect the health of the broad South African community."

N Jinabhai

