
HEALTH POLICY

Crisis and Reform in the U.S. Health Care Delivery System

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Crisis and Reform in the U.S. Health Care Delivery System

Fifth Edition

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FOREWORD

The issues discussed in this fifth edition of *Health Policy* are truly the issues of the millennium, though many of them have remained the same over the years since the first edition of this book was published. That they seem so intractable should not surprise us, because reaching consensus on issues such as universality of health care, the poor, access to care, and organization of care is difficult for all of the countries in the world, whether industrialized or developing. However, Americans' idiosyncratic views about money and justice, among other things, lead to ambivalence and changeability with regard to political solutions on both the local and national levels in the United States. There appears to be little question that the public has great concern about the current state of health care, and the flaws in current approaches. In fact, as this edition is being published, polls place concerns about health care at the top of Americans' priorities and various political approaches are anticipated to quell these concerns. It is unfortunate that some of these approaches seem beneficial to much of the public but have potentially negative implications for costs of pharmaceuticals and for the continuing power of the private for-profit sector in dominating health care delivery.

In the United States, there has not been a strong national coalition behind the development of a public movement for a universal health care system. As a result of the inability to mobilize the political force of the nation, a number of states have made efforts to get the question of universal care on their own agendas. Ultimately, the value placed on quality of care and access to care by the American public has to be revealed in the voting booth. If that value is high, change is inevitable; if the American public is fearful of the consequences of an inclusive health care policy, decades will pass with millions of people unserved, underserved, and receiving care of questionable quality.

The fifth edition of *Health Policy* retains a few articles from the previous edition. These articles are classic in that they provide a frame of reference and backdrop for understanding the problems in the U.S. health care system and the basic health policy issues. Most articles in this volume are new, however, and permit us to keep up with the constantly changing issues in health policy at the leading edge of current discussions.

Part I begins with a review of what health policy is and how the political system operates. Focusing on issues of health status of the population and vulnerable groups, Part II details issues of race, gender, and income disparities as well as discrimination. Some of the issues at the core of access are the growing uninsured population, social inequality, mental health, aging, long-term care, and end-of-life care policies.

In discussing health care delivery system issues, the articles in Part III deal with organizational change, labor issues, and quality of care. Mergers and restructuring, primary care, staffing issues in hospitals and nursing homes, shortages in the workforce, errors in

health care, and public reporting of quality indicators are invaluable for health professionals both on first reading and as references for repeated readings and use.

Part IV discusses the economics of health care with articles on public and private financing and insurance and managed care. Part V deals with reform of the health care system in the United States. Along the way, the outstanding analysts of health care systems discuss trends and systems in Canada, the United Kingdom, and other industrialized countries. In addition, definitions of health policy, failures in policy, crises in nursing caused by misapplied policy and public inaction, and potential solutions through health reform are presented.

The fifth edition of *Health Policy* is designed for all health professionals and anyone interested in or involved in the health care field. The authors are all experts in their subject matter. In their thoughtful articles, the most challenging issues facing the United States are explicated. The content provides information that will enrich the reader's understanding of the specifics and generalities of the problems Americans face in health care, both in the present and in the future. It also provides the impetus for individual and collective action.

Claire M. Fagin, PhD, FAAN

INTRODUCTION

This edited volume is designed for health professionals and for students of health policy and economics. Health policy and economics are constantly changing, and the literature in the area is expanding at an alarming pace. This growth makes it difficult for those learning about the area to identify the most important topics for study and the changing issues and trends. This volume highlights the key issues and trends that we cover in our policy courses in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco. We have selected our favorite articles about health status and access, delivery systems, costs and economics, politics, and health reform.

Health policy is a new arena for many health professionals, and many realize that they must become knowledgeable in this area to improve health care both for their own patients and for the public at large. Health professionals working in organizations, public health, primary and specialty care, private practice, and management positions are all directly affected by the organization and financing of the health care system, including those policies and politics that shape the system. Health policy does not come naturally to many health professionals who may have undergone long and arduous clinical training focusing on caring for individuals and families. The organizational, systemic, and political issues sometimes seem too overwhelming to comprehend. Nevertheless, health professionals must move beyond their basic training to become more politically aware and active in shaping policy and advocating for their own interests and the interests of their patients. They also must move beyond clinical research into policy-relevant research, addressing the larger issues affecting their patients and the health professions as a whole. Indeed, a research and policy focus on organizations, financing, and systems of care can have more impact than any single clinical study.

This book is designed to focus on the “big picture” issues and to present the viewpoints of sociologists, economists, political scientists, and health experts. The language these experts use is different and sometimes difficult, but understanding it is essential to be able to communicate with public policy makers and health services and policy researchers.

Health professionals come to the policy arena with many strengths and liabilities. Their greatest strength is that they are viewed positively by the public and the policy makers as caring providers with a real commitment to patients and the health of the public. Consequently, the public and the policy makers are willing to listen to their perspectives on health issues. They are knowledgeable about the day-to-day problems of their patients and families and are able to present these problems in a way that the public and policy makers can understand. Moreover, health professional organizations can use their size and energy to have a major influence on policy making.

In the past, health professionals have had relatively little political impact and power because they have not exercised their potential influence. Many health professionals have had little education about policy and system issues. In addition to having a wide range of political views (from liberal to conservative), and affiliations (from Republican to Democrat to Independent), health professionals are divided into many specialty groups and organizations, with only a small percentage participating in their national organizations. These individuals are frequently reluctant to pay membership dues and to volunteer their time and energy to perform organizational work. This hesitancy is understandable because health professionals are often managing jobs, families, caring for sick parents and children, and going to school, among many other day-to-day responsibilities, leaving little time for political action. As the overall competition in the job market intensifies, professional work pressures and stress may further reduce health professionals' participation in professional and political organizations.

This book is designed to persuade health professionals that they need to add political work to their lives. The strength to influence health policy can come only when health professionals are better informed about policy, economics, and politics and unite behind some common goals. To be effective, political and professional actions should be undertaken through organizations rather than as individual health professionals. Enthusiasm for their own specialty organizations should not divert health professionals from participation in the local, state, and national organizations that address the broader issues related to the health profession.

This book focuses on the important policy issues of our times. It attempts to arm health professionals with facts about the system and the names of key policy shapers. Because health care statistics are updated frequently, it is important not to memorize facts but rather to learn the most important sources for information so that current information can be retrieved when needed. The book also highlights trends that tend to move forward until public policy changes or private system changes alter their progress.

Public policies are actions that are taken by policy makers at the federal, state, and local levels. These actions can include budgetary changes, legislative changes, regulatory changes, and often judicial rulings. Before health professionals can advocate for public policy changes, they need a clear understanding of the current federal policies that affect the health system and its operation, including the financial incentives that influence health providers and organizations.

Part I of this book begins with an understanding of health policy and the political process. The vested interests in and politics of the failure of President Bill Clinton's health plan are examined, as well as the potential role of health professionals in changing the health system. Part II examines the health status of the U.S. population, examining health disparities and discrimination among different population groups, including issues of access to care, aging, disability, and long-term care. The overall poor health status of the U.S. population is, in part, the result of limited access to services, especially for the poor, uninsured, and vulnerable populations. Part III discusses dramatic changes occurring in the health care delivery system and in organizations, including labor issues and quality of care.

Part IV focuses on how economics drives the entire health system in the United States and affects the day-to-day operations of health care organizations and professionals. Trends in financing health care services and the health industry are described, including

the growth in public financing of Medicare and Medicaid and private financing. Private insurance and managed care are emphasized because of the rapid shift to managed care.

Part V, the final section of the book, is dedicated to health care reform. Articles examine health systems in other countries—particularly Canada—as potential models for the United States. Finally, a vision for the future of health care reform is presented.

This book is not designed to represent a broad spectrum of political ideas but rather to provide the perspectives of expert health services researchers as well as policy leaders who are both consumer-oriented and advocates for health reform. Most articles are critical of the existing health care system and hold the underlying assumption that changes in the system are needed. The status quo of millions of individuals in the United States continuing without access to health insurance, and millions of women and children with unacceptably poor health status, must be corrected.

Although reform is clearly needed, as yet a consensus has not emerged among health professionals and the public about how such reform should be accomplished. In this book, we show the urgent need for reform and urge health professionals to become politically active, using their political power and influence to improve the current system. Although the political problems of our health care system may seem overwhelming, the system *can* be changed if we develop an understanding of the underlying problems and unite behind reform strategies. The failed efforts of health reform in the early 1990s can be corrected in the coming decade.

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