

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

PAT ARMSTONG and HUGH ARMSTRONG, *Health Care. About Canada Series*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2008, 155 p.

This text serves as an important primer for anyone needing a review of Canadian Medicare history or, perhaps more importantly, a critical analysis of some of the main issues with which it currently struggles. Within their text, Armstrong and Armstrong have briefly reviewed seminal Medicare events (both early and more recent), overviewed strengths and weaknesses of the system, reviewed contemporary sirens that shape systems and feed the discourses of health care reform, and offered prescriptions for Medicare.

Armstrong and Armstrong take as fundamental the need to preserve this publicly valued and largely effective program, while recognizing that it is in need of tune-up and strengthening. They encourage readers away from the “crisis” mentalities that often contextualize our health care debates and remind us that, in addition to a lack of evidence supporting privatization as a solution, Medicare is about more than simply providing health care. At a minimum, Medicare is a social program designed to level accessibility to hospital and physician services, but beyond that it is a highly valued social program, intended to redistribute wealth and health resources from some of the more privileged of our numbers to some of the less privileged. Within this context, Armstrong and Armstrong make a call to action, reminding each of us of our democratic rights and responsibilities both to get informed and involved.

The lay presentation style of the text makes it highly readable and ensures accessibility across a range of audiences. The text would be an excellent resource for students needing a more thorough introduction to the Canadian health care system than that provided in the few paragraphs or pages offered up in most undergraduate textbooks. With their toehold in history and present-day issues, students then wishing more detail could pull some of the classic histories (e.g., Malcolm G. Taylor’s seven decisions that created the Canadian health insurance system), contemporary in-depth analyses (e.g., Kurt Wetzel’s examination of labour relations and health reform) or more detailed corrective prescriptions (e.g., Michael Rachlis’ arguments for quality agendas and primary care reform).

This text could serve as a useful resource not just for undergraduate students but professors as well who might like to use this text as a quick

read to help brush up their history or come up to speed on contemporary issues facing the system. It would also serve as a primer for general Canadian audiences, helping readers better understand the strengths and foibles of the current system, and critically consider the privatization arguments offered up by a small number of vocal critics of publicly funded care.

The section of the text where the authors argue against privatization as a solution to contemporary issues could have been formatted so as to be punchier, perhaps even numbering and bolding the sub-arguments as they are attacked and countered. Certainly the information is all there, but a few formatting changes could have strengthened its presentation. Similarly, a list of “suggested readings” might have made this component a tighter resource.

Although there is nothing particularly new in this text, it successfully pulls the strands all together into one highly readable package. The authors have provided a critical analysis of some of the Achilles heels of the public system and used as reasons to call for privatization (e.g., wait times, labour shortages, rising costs). In using evidence to debunk these issues, Armstrong and Armstrong show how privatization would not settle the issues, and in some cases could even exacerbate them.

I like this book, but I am a supporter of publicly funded social programs, especially health care. I think the text is an excellent resource for those of us who understand and believe in the social justice inherent in this model and want to support it in the face of calls for privatization and consumer rights. That said, I am not sure that critics of public systems will gain much from this text and it is unlikely to convert critics. It will, however, buoy supporters, and perhaps just maybe even tumble a few fence sitters.

This text is the first in a new Fernwood series which will overview critical issues facing Canadian society, from childcare to agriculture. I look forward to reading future editions in this series and incorporating them as added resources in my undergraduate classes. In the meantime, this one may just find its way into the Christmas packages of a few folks I know who need to be reminded of this history and, more importantly, the evidence against privatization as a health reform solution.

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