Reviews

From Cradle to Grave: The History of the NHS
Parts 1 and 2
Geoffrey Rivett
Blurb Books
410pp and 340pp | £19.69 and £17.59
No ISBN numbers

PART ONE of this work was originally published in 1998 by the King’s Fund. The author has now revised it and added a second volume that takes the story of the NHS up to the coalition government before last month’s general election.

The dense text of these substantial volumes reflects the complexity of health policy in this country over the past six decades. A consistent theme is that British society has undergone constant political and social change during this period, and so the NHS has had to adapt to survive in anything like its present form.

New technology has challenged budgets and ways of working to the extent that an academic in the 1950s joked that a healthy person is someone who has been inadequately investigated. Since then, debates over the boundaries between health and illness have only intensified. Patient expectations have also added to the pressures on the system.

The changes affecting nursing receive considerable attention. These sections combine detailed accounts of reports into the profession with anecdotes, and there is a pervasive sense of a lost golden age for nursing: ‘in the past, nursing’s acceptance of medical leadership in the NHS had the advantage that with it came medicine’s protection’. Once nurses embraced professional autonomy, higher education and ‘the distraction of high status professionalism’, this protection disappeared, with all kinds of negative consequences for nurses.

There is plenty to debate in these volumes. John Adams is an honorary research associate in the faculty of nursing and midwifery, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

International outlook

Lessons to be learned from Ebola epidemic

THE EBOLA epidemic has devastated families and healthcare workers throughout Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, where it has caused more than 10,000 deaths including 500 among healthcare workers.

The crisis has had a much wider impact, however, so much so that it has reinforced the need for better international co-ordination in containing the spread of communicable diseases and strengthened the arguments for reform in the World Health Organization (WHO). The epidemic has also raised questions about safe practice for healthcare professionals in the affected countries but also for volunteers, including nurses, returning to Europe.

WHO has been going through a period of reform aimed at ensuring that it focuses on fewer but more significant health challenges, that its finances are geared more towards it carrying out the work that member governments collectively agree, rather than in the interests of individual funders, and to make its regional offices more accountable.

It has now acknowledged that it was slow to respond to the disease outbreak in West Africa and mobilise resources, and many have particularly criticised the Africa regional office and its lack of co-operation with Geneva.

The criticism could speed reforms and a rethink of its complex decision making, which means a large chunk of the budget is spent on administration and management, and not the technical programmes where there may well be greater opportunities for nursing input.

The Ebola response will also have implications for national preparedness and practice in many countries in relation to future disease outbreaks. Was there sufficient input from the right people? Was there consistent guidance? Just two of the questions that the response has prompted here in the UK.

However, for countries such as Sierra Leone, which remains near the bottom of the United Nations human development index and has high maternal mortality rates, long-term support and investment in national healthcare systems will be central to coping with any future such challenges.

Find out more

The RCN’s international committee is hosting a lecture at RCN congress on June 24 to explore the wider lessons for nursing from the current Ebola outbreak. Go to www.rcn.org.uk/news/events/congress/2015

Susan Williams is a senior international adviser at the RCN.