Health Policy and the National Health Service
Judy Allsop, Longman

The NHS: A Picture of Health?
Steve Iliffe, Lawrence & Wishart

Both of these highly topical books about the National Health Service trace its evolution and the subsequent progression of health care in Britain. They address the same problems currently faced by the NHS, but the respective authors adopt highly individual and thought-provoking approaches to the processes through which health policies are determined and health care provided. Although the books show no obvious similarity in format, they share as their underlying theme the belief that the Health Service is undergoing a period of change in relation to its structure.

In Health Policy and the National Health Service Judy Allsop questions the popular assumption that a National Health Service has solved the problems of dealing with ill-health and argues that the very provision of medical and health care built around the disease model of illness and curative medicine has obscured the social bases of illness.

The introduction sets the scene with a look at the various possible aims of health policy and Chapter Two follows with a useful historical background to the 1946 NHS Act. It traces the rise of the medical profession and state intervention in health, alongside a shift from a preventive approach to health in the mid-nineteenth century to a more curative emphasis in the early twentieth century. These developments are related to the aims and intentions of the Act and the extent to which they influenced the final administrative structure of 1948.

The various chapters in Part 2 give accounts of the health policy problems facing governments and examine the changing attitudes and ideology about health and the increasingly diverse views about the proper focus for health care policy and objectives of the health services. It traces policies related to the distribution of services and the funding and management of the NHS.

Allsop argues that successive governments' search for efficient and effective resource use in the Health Authorities is limited by the absence of accurate ways of relating health service inputs, such as manpower, to outputs that might define effective health care.

The health service reorganisations of 1974 and 1982 are well documented, together with the movement towards a mixed economy of health. Allsop observes, however, that little has changed regarding the influence and power of clinicians to commit resources.

Part 3 deals with the more fundamental issues that have brought about greater uncertainty in health care policy. The social bases of health are examined together with recent policies for prevention. Deficiencies of the NHS are also examined in the light of some recent critiques from social science and medicine.