

## Book Reviews

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### Recensions

#### ***Health Care in Canada: A Citizen's Guide to Policy and Politics***

Katherine Fierlbeck  
University of Toronto Press, 2011

**Reviewed by Josée Couture, University of Calgary**

Universal health care has long held a prominent position in Canadian nation building. Moreover, health care will always be political: it can be a source of patriotism, a tool used to gain electoral support, or an indicator of conflict between its construction as a need or a commodity. There is no denying that full participation in the decision-making processes concerning health care issues requires an understanding of the inner-workings of the system, what the reform options are, and the different interests advanced by key actors. *Health Care in Canada: A Citizen's Guide to Policy and Politics* aims to provide its readers with the necessary information to prepare them for contributing to the discussion.

The development of the Canadian health care system is examined through a critical analysis of the political landscape, intellectual debates, power struggles, and various processes around the system. Katherine Fierlbeck's main argument is that the development of Canadian health care policy has been determined by the legacy of structures of federal governance and the country's constitutional framework, coupled with the historical interplay of financial and political motivations. She stresses that no perfect system exists and, though many covet the successes other countries have experienced, these systems are likely not transferable as they were developed in specific political cultures and institutional contexts.

*Health Care in Canada* is only one of a handful of current books on the subject that are not primarily intended as university course textbooks. It is informed by a historical comparative methodology, and Fierlbeck presents alternative cases and features in a neutral manner, providing supporting and opposing evidence for each one; only afterwards does she reveal her position and substantiate it further. Though the breadth and scope of the book is tremendously lofty, its approach is quite pragmatic.

This book wastes no time jumping right into the thick of things from the very first page. Explaining the intricacies of political, economic, and moral debates, Fierlbeck breathes life and meaning into the dry archival materials of policy, law, and legislation. The language she engages is mostly accessible, except for a few words, concepts and legal terms peppered throughout the text. The story *Health Care in Canada* is committed to tell is extremely complex and, regrettably, difficult to reduce to bare fundamentals. Even deciphering the figures demands expertise. Almost every sentence holds a new piece of information, threatening to overwhelm its audience and forcing many to contemplate a second read through. There is such a volume of data that brevity necessitated a glossing over of certain aspects less central to the main discussions (for instance, extra-billing and user fees). One is left to wonder if the major points could have still been made with a thinned-out manuscript.

Fierlbeck begins by providing a comprehensive and orderly examination of the financing, delivery, governance, structure, and administration of the Canadian health care system. Her account includes deliberation on the inequalities and inefficiencies that degrade the quality of health services, the long history of experimental fine-tuning with various models and reforms, and the effects of recessions, cutbacks, legal challenges and human resource shortages. She explains that the provinces exercise relative freedom to experiment with their own combinations of public and private elements by adhering to the *Canada Health Act* in order to avoid federal clawbacks and appease public pressures, rather than being required to by law. As a result, diverse and innovative models have been developed, in combination with a degree of independence that has made a unified system impossible and changes difficult to accomplish. Furthermore, increasing private options within the Canadian health care system has been under considerable debate. The lure of shifting government expenditures to the private sector is strong and market-based solutions could potentially alleviate a number of inefficiencies apparent in public health options. Privatization, however, has demonstrated a number of critical flaws, most importantly, the compromise of equal access by every Canadian.

The power and influence of extremely profitable pharmaceutical companies is also of grave concern. Capable of evading government regulatory authority and establishing favourable political environments, pharmaceutical companies' dishonest and corrupt practices have endangered many lives. In addition, Fierlbeck discusses the problem of "creeping privatization" through rising drug costs and the debate over a national pharmacare system. She then moves on to elaborate on mental health care and finishes with a comparison between Britain, Sweden, France, Germany, and the United States, teasing out the pros and cons of their health care systems and making explicit lessons relevant to Canada's current situation.

In the end, Fierlbeck concludes that the Canadian health system, notwithstanding a number of serious issues in need of immediate attention, is based on a relatively sensible framework. Rejecting privatization as a solution to inefficiencies, *Health Care in Canada* instead proposes that a sharper focus on organization, coordination, and cooperation would greatly improve the administration of health services in Canada.