The NHS at 60: three anniversary events

In November 2008 the Centre organised three events which marked the 60th anniversary of the British National Health Service. We decided not to focus on Aneurin Bevan and the foundation, which was such a popular theme in other quarters, but instead to take a contemporary historical slant. Our subject was the management and organisation of the service, considering in particular the reforms of the 1980s and their long term effects.

We began by convening a Witness Seminar on the 1983 Griffiths NHS Management Inquiry, when Margaret Thatcher’s government invited supermarket boss Roy Griffiths to review the service. The result was his installation of general management and the beginning of more assertive lay and central control, which has gradually impacted on clinician autonomy. Amongst the witnesses were ex-Secretary of State Lord (Norman) Fowler, civil servant Sir Graham Hart, the leading medical manager Sir Cyril Chantler, ex-RCN general secretary Christine Hancock and several others. The discussion explored the reasons for the appointment of Griffiths, his motives for conducting a swift investigation without open consultation, the effect on existing administrators of the introduction of general management, and the long term significance of the Inquiry.

To read the transcript click here: The Griffiths NHS Management Inquiry. Please contact Ingrid James with your name and institution to receive a free printable PDF.

Speakers Left to Right. Lord Fowler, Nicholas Timmins, (Chair), Sir Grahm Hart, Sir Michael Bett and Christine Hancock. Photgraphs by Anne Koerber, LSHTM.

This was followed next day by a conference which explored recent scholarly work on the history of the management of NHS. Speakers included both historians working on the NHS, like Martin Gorsky, Stephanie Snow and Tony Cutler, and policy analysts reflecting historically, like Mark Exworthy, Steve Harrison, Pauline Allen and Naomi Fulop. Papers reported results of interview studies with NHS managers reflecting on the meaning of the change from ‘administration’ to ‘management’ from the 1980s, the long history of performance indicators, the recent turns away from and back towards the market, and the uses of managerial restructuring with ‘failing’ trusts.

Rounding off the day was the annual History Centre lecture, given this year by Rudolf Klein, who is Honorary Professor at LSHTM. Klein is the author of one of the major survey texts on the political history of the NHS, and his lecture was entitled ‘The Bevan-Morrison debate: the shape of things to come in the NHS?’ The theme was the tension between localism and central control in the NHS, which he argued was present right from the outset, in the tussle between Bevan and Herbert Morrison over whether to give local government charge of the service. Klein than tracked the periodic resurgence of the question of how to balance local choice with national goals, showing how this was never resolved and is inherent to the structure established in 1948.
These events made clear the importance of a sound historical understanding of the NHS’s past if we are to make sense of the policy choices now facing us. We plan to publish the Witness Seminar text, and hopefully the papers too in the course of 2009, and will keep you posted!