

BOOK REVIEW

The NHS at 70: A Living History *by Ellen Welch*

Paperback, 152 pages
Pen and Sword Books
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The NHS at 70 is mainly a chronology of the major events influencing the way the National Health Service has developed since its foundation. The text is interspersed by a dozen testimonials from various contributors who have either worked in or used the service.

Positivity in the first few years descends into gloom and despondency. A nurse describes her experiences in the 1950s as *"hard physical work but I liked it a lot"*. A vet contrasts the public's attitude to paying for pets with free treatment for themselves. A journalist whose friends and family are *"littered with stories of NHS horrors"* suggests the service would be better funded for prevention rather than reaction. And a doctor likens the NHS to *"the shuffling of deck chairs on the Titanic while our politicians instruct the band to play on, oblivious of the looming crisis"*.

Dr Ellen Welch begins with a cursory history of medicine, before describing the state of health provision prior to the NHS. In the final chapter, she discusses the present state of the NHS and her prognosis is as gloomy as many of her contributors. Her conclusions are appropriately headed by a quote attributed to the Roman satirist Gaius Petronius: *"reorganising [is] a wonderful method of creating the illusion of progress while producing inefficiency and demoralization"*.

The book is presented in an easily digestible style and provides a useful synopsis of the reorganisational continuum which, for better or worse, has characterised the NHS. It is too slim a volume to provide a deep analysis or scholarly thesis on the events which have shaped the modern NHS. The author has avoided annotating the text with references although a bibliography is provided. There are some scattered errors and curious statements in the first chapter and not all the content of this chapter is strictly relevant to the NHS.

I recently watched the film *Doctor in the House* which is the nearest I could get to experiencing a "living history" of the NHS in its early years. I'm not sure how this book can be a living history in the defined sense of the phrase. Admittedly, the NHS is still alive, although frail and ailing at 70. Despite these niggles, I would recommend this book as required reading for politicians and health service managers. It is also a useful starting point for historians wishing to embark on further studies.

Roger Rolls
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