

Understanding Health Policy: A Clinical Approach. By Thomas S. Bodenheimer and Kevin Grumbach. 259 pp. Norwalk, CO, Appleton & Lange, 1995. \$26 (paper). ISBN 0-8385-3678-6.

This new paperback book on health policy is a welcome addition because the topic is becoming increasingly important for all physicians. It is an excellent and concise approach to the fundamentals of health policy and how the US health system works. The book is well organized and is written specifically for medical students, residents, and practicing physicians.

Six of the 17 chapters in the book are taken from a series of health policy articles that were originally published this past year in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. These and other chapters explain clearly most of the basic principles of health policy, including how health care is paid for, how health care is organized, and issues related to access to care and reimbursement to providers. In addition, the authors cover cost control, long-term care, prevention, and the quality of medical care. Finally, there is an excellent history of how the US health care system has developed, the principles regarding what can be done to change it, and examples of health care systems in other countries. For those wanting to use this book as a classroom text, the last chapter contains an excellent collection of questions and topics for discussion that are related to the previous chapters.

The highlight of this book is its clinical approach to understanding health policy, something that is lacking

in most health policy books. The authors, both primary care physicians, have been quite successful in framing health policy issues from the practicing physician's perspective, a major reason why this book is so readable and relevant to the family physician. In a unique and refreshing manner, there are a large number of clinical vignettes interspersed throughout each chapter, which put the concepts and terminology of health policy into the context of the clinician's day-to-day practice.

While not a definitive text for health policy experts, this volume is clearly the best introductory book I have seen on health policy, particularly for physicians. It should be required reading for all medical students and residents. Practicing physicians will also be able to learn about the fundamentals of health care policy by reading this book. Personally, I wish that it had been available prior to my own year working as a Health Policy Fellow in Washington.

If physicians are going to have an opportunity to influence future health policy — something that is critical if our health system is going to serve the needs of the population effectively — they will need to understand the terminology and basics of the organization and financing of health care. This book is an excellent and readable place to begin.

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