

Book Reviews

medicine, but it must be remembered that in its day herbal medicine was conventional medicine. Of more importance, to those having no knowledge of scientific Latin, this new edition will be of great value as primary source material in the medical history of the sixteenth century.

Elizabeth Lazenby,
University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Joel D Howell, *Technology in the hospital: transforming patient care in the early twentieth century*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. xv, 341, illus., £39.50 (0-8018-5020-7).

This book was a good idea. Writing a history of patient care in the early twentieth century from the perspective of technology makes a refreshing read. Howell has combed through the records of the New York and Pennsylvania hospitals for the first quarter of this century and shows convincingly how technology was increasingly, almost insidiously, built into the management of patients' lives. Management is the right word here. Taking his cue from historians who have, rightly, interpreted technology very broadly, Howell devotes a great deal of his initial space to demonstrating how patients were increasingly managed by off-stage technologies. Punched cards and calculating machines transformed the care of the sick just as much as (maybe more than) the use of the electrocardiograph. Howell does not attempt any comprehensive history but confines himself to a number of case studies: the X-ray machine, urinalysis, blood counts.

Howell also takes in surgery, and in one of the most revealing chapters he addresses the staggering rise in the rate of tonsillectomies early in the century, a rise which he catalogues in impressive detail. In 1900 just over 2 per cent of patients discharged from the Pennsylvania Hospital had been diagnosed as having tonsillar disease. By 1925 the figure had risen to over 25 per cent. Howell's picture of surgery as the apotheosis of streamlined,

high-tech, quick-fix medicine dovetails neatly with more general images of North American self-perceptions in the twenties. It would have been helpful if Howell had provided more information on the day-to-day running of the technologies described here. It is never quite clear who is doing the tests, where the clinical laboratory was, who was in control of it and so on. Nevertheless, this is a most valuable study, although the press must obviously bear responsibility for some of the less than comprehensible tables (p. 24 for example).

Christopher Lawrence, Wellcome Institute

Derek A Dow, *Safeguarding the public health: a history of the New Zealand Department of Health*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1995, pp. 302, illus., NZ \$39.95 (0-86473-285-6).

The writing of institutional or departmental histories, especially of commissioned histories, is a delicate art, fraught, as recent historical debate has emphasized, with dangers to objective interpretation. Even where the historian is given a free hand, there remain pressures from interested individuals who have been involved in the institution's past. It is impossible to read—let alone write—such histories without a continuing awareness of the existence of such pressures, and their tactful handling is a measure of a historian's skill. Happily such pressures do not obtrude in Donald Dow's history of New Zealand's Health Department, which steers a deft course between such shoals.

The subject of this book being the work of a health department from 1900 to the present, much of the material inevitably relates to such subjects as child health, maternity services, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases, and health education. Questions of historical objectivity apart, therefore, Dow has also had to confront a second major obstacle for institutional historians—how to organize a century's multi-focused administrative effort into a coherent narrative. There are two