The Rise and Fall of National Women’s Hospital. A history


New Zealand’s National Women’s Hospital recently held its 50th anniversary and this therefore is a timely release of Linda Bryder’s latest book. This is not another book about the Cartwright Inquiry nor a simple documentation of personnel and events in the history of National Women’s Hospital.

Childbirth and hence women’s health and care of the newborn is a core aspect of what it is to be human. The social history of our attitudes and behaviour in the care of women is therefore of wide interest. Bryder captures this well in her description of the history of National Women’s Hospital.

In some ways she narrates the transition of the perspective of New Zealand society from well-meaning paternalistic and anglophile to the modern political environment.

Her history, while not exhaustive, is well written and a very interesting read. It appears well researched and in the absence of knowledge to the contrary I am happy to accept the reported facts at face value.

There are a number of aspects of the history that are perhaps under-reported and a number of significant contributions will not be mentioned. Her interpretation of events is unlikely to please all readers and like her previous book on the National Women’s Inquiry will create some debate. The fact that women’s health care is very much alive and well in Auckland is perhaps not reflected in the title and may also cause some concern.

It is a reminder of the enormous goodwill and hard work from New Zealanders and their health providers that have helped create one of the best public health services in the world. Indeed, New Zealand women and the wider medical and political community should look beyond the details, absorb the important lessons of the past, and work together to provide high quality health care for all New Zealand women and their newborn children, while maintaining an international contribution to advancements in medical science. In conclusion an interesting read which I believe many readers beyond those with a direct interest in National Women’s Hospital will find both enjoyable and thought-provoking.

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