

Reviews

Confronting an Ill Society. David Widgery, general practice, idealism and the chase for change

Patrick Hutt with Iona Heath and Roger Neighbour

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Following an election notably devoid of ideology, this book takes us back to the headier days of the 1970s and 1980s. We are reminded of events such as the *Oz* trial, Rock against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League. Walk-on parts are played by such luminaries as Paul Foot, Michael Rosen, Julian Tudor-Hart and of course, David Widgery himself.

This book is about Patrick Hutt's discovery of David Widgery, an East London general practitioner (GP), political activist, polemicist and writer. Hutt 'discovered' Widgery after he had died, on the advice of his tutor when taking a year out of his medical course to study history and philosophy. At the time Hutt was ambivalent about continuing to study medicine, and describes how researching Widgery's life for his dissertation rekindled his enthusiasm, and provided a model for a politically aware practice of medicine. Several years later (Hutt is now training to be a GP), and with the help of Roger Neighbour and Iona Heath, the dissertation has been developed into a book. This documents Widgery's life from his childhood experience of polio, his decision to study medicine, through political activism and general practice, to his death in

1992 of a drug overdose when aged 45. Hutt draws on press cuttings and interviews with those who knew Widgery (this is where the characters mentioned in the first paragraph come in, for example Paul Foot wrote his obituary in the *Independent*).

It reminds us of Widgery's incredible outputs, including books reflecting on general practice in a deprived environment, a short tenure as editor of *Oz* when the usual editors were in prison on trial, and a regular *BMJ* column. It also reminds us of fights against hospital closures, and collective practices where all staff received the same rate of pay. For those working in health care, the most interesting and relevant sections are about what it means to be a 'political' GP, how life as a GP can inspire political activity, and how a political stance can inform practice.

Debates about general practice and what it is for continue today – for example the conflict between public health and patient advocacy, and the value of the generalist in providing continuity and understanding the social and psychological components of medical problems against patient choice and efficient skill mix. We can only speculate how Widgery would have contributed to these discussions, but I think the suggestion from one contributor that he would have been an adviser to Tony Blair is very unlikely!

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