Book Review

Mental Health and Social Policy: The Emergence of Managed Care, 4th ed.

This book is a testament to David Mechanic’s skills as a writer, researcher, and dispassionate analyzer and observer of the mental health policy arena for the past 40 years. Dr. Mechanic has produced a comprehensive and well-balanced book on the major issues and questions that mental health planners, services researchers, advocates, and practitioners confront. This book offers a framework and an understanding of how mental health policy is a product of the social cultural context and societal institutions, including numerous governmental entities. He remains true to his sociological roots.

This is an extremely readable book that stands in contrast to the genre of most policy books. It is neither replete with numerous dates and details of relevant federal legislation and court cases nor devoid of a sense of the people who are the intended beneficiaries of these policies. The author makes a very well reasoned argument as to why the focus of public policies should be directed toward those individuals with the most severe and persistent mental illnesses and their families, and why investing limited resources in prevention programs is probably not the wisest of strategies. The research evidence is just not there.

Dr. Mechanic is masterful at demonstrating the relevance and importance of research to social policy formation and execution. He has been extremely successful at integrating the most relevant research of the past 40 years into his presentation. The classic mental health research studies and theories are skillfully interwoven—Goffman, Clausen and Yarrow, Stan-
are served, and that benefit designs need to go beyond purely medical services to “housing, rehabilitation, safety, and quality of life” (p. 214), given the needs of those with severe mental illnesses. But there is a fear on the part of those committed to serving this population that service providers who have the expertise with working with this most severe population may be eliminated, and replaced by those with a profit motive and no knowledge of what these individuals need in terms of treatment and service supports.

A chapter entitled, “Centralized Perspectives in Formulating Mental Health Policies,” covers a diversity of topics that are essential to determining whom to treat, when and where to treat, the parameters and standards of clinical practice, and how to pay for treatment. The topics are important to understanding policy formulation and implementation, but appeared not to fall conceptually within the domains of other chapters.

The chapter on innovative mental health services has a thoughtful discussion of the impediments to the diffusion of innovations. The next to the final chapter does an excellent job of demonstrating that mental health providers play an integral part in public policy through serving a social control function for society. I also appreciated Dr. Mechanic’s discussion of the sociocultural influences on the practices and judgements of mental health providers and the distinctions between the scientist and the practitioner. The final chapter deals with mental health laws, such as involuntary and outpatient commitment, and the role of the courts in the development of such policies as the right to treatment and the right to refuse medication. Although this book bears a 1999 publication date, it is already outdated in that it does not include the recent American with Disability Act cases with regard to issues of community integration of those with severe mental illness.

Overall, this is an extremely impressive book that offers a broad picture for those working with or on behalf of those targeted to be the recipients of the services created in response to these public policies. This is important reading for those practicing within the system, who tend all too frequently to have a myopic view of mental health services and policies or focus on a circumscribed issue and are unaware of the larger policy arena. This book will give these professionals a broader perspective on mental health policy and increased appreciation of where their work fits into the overall picture.

This is an excellent text for students in mental health practice areas such as social work, psychiatric nursing, and psychology and those new to the advocacy arena. But for increased depth on the topic, this book needs to be supplemented with additional readings. It is a great starting point for students to gain an understanding of the breadth of what is meant by mental health policy. The book communicates that social welfare, employment, housing policies, etc., are also a part of mental health policy. However, this book does not touch on state mental health legislation, which is a significant component of mental health policy. In many aspects, the U.S. mental health policy is 50 separate policies, with each state having its own system of financing and organizing services, as well as policy regarding psychiatric commitment. Even within a given state, the implementation of the state commitment policy may differ by locale.

For those well versed in mental health research and policy, this book will offer little that is new. While this group is not the intended audience for this book, such individuals might enjoy a well-written and well-conceptualized presentation of the material.

One particular area of omission in the book is psychiatric rehabilitation and the psychosocial rehabilitation movement. Given Dr. Mechanic’s orientation toward those with the most disabling of mental disorders, this omission is surprising. I couldn’t help but feel that a more apt title for the book would probably be Mental Illness and Social Policy.

Why mental illness as opposed to mental health? First, Dr. Mechanic makes a well-substantiated case for public policy to address the needs of those with mental illnesses as opposed to those with problems in living or emotional disorders. While I totally concur with his position, I found that his presentation with regard to services focuses on alleviating suffering and treating deficits, but not on enhancing strengths. He does not mention recovery or consumer empowerment nor the role that consumers currently play in policy formation. Consumers are now represented on just about all national and state policy and planning committees. Their representation is even required by federal legislation; cf. the Mental Health Planning Act, P.L. 99-660. Although too often I feel that consumer-representation is still token, their presence does require providers, policy makers, and administrations to consider the consumer position on relevant