

MEDICAL RELIGION IN BRITAIN

The United Kingdom is this year celebrating the 60th anniversary of its National Health Service (NHS). In 1948, the inaugural government circular proudly proclaimed:

*"Your New National Health Service begins on 5th July ... It will provide you with all medical, dental, and nursing care. Everyone — rich or poor, man, woman or child — can use it or any part of it. There are no charges, except for a few special items. There are no insurance qualifications. But it is not a "charity". You are all paying for it, mainly as taxpayers, and it will relieve your money worries in time of illness."**

Since those heady days, its principles of centrally funded health care, which is both universal and free at the point of delivery, have remained unchanged.

The NHS is now so firmly embedded in the prevailing zeitgeist of the British Isles that it has displaced religion as an article of faith. To quote a commentator: *"The National Health Service is the closest thing the English have to a religion, with those who practice in it regarding themselves as a priesthood. This made it quite extraordinarily difficult to reform."* (Nigel Lawson, 1992)†

Like other religions, it has spread its tenets abroad — to both Canada and Australia. But drawing parallels between religion and the NHS is hardly surprising. After all, modern medicine was founded in the temples of ancient Greece and nurtured in the monasteries of the Middle Ages.

Thus, our legacy of medicine as a modern religion remains alive and well in the UK's NHS, for the *"model of health care as a secular church represents the tradition maintained and carefully tended over the decades by the disciples of [NHS founder and the then Minister of Health] Aneurin Bevan"* (Rudolf Klein, 1995).†

The same might be said of our own NHS clone, Medicare — like any religion, it is easy to call upon in time of need, but any notion of reform is heresy!



Martin B Van Der Weyden

* The new National Health Service. *BMJ* 2008; 337 (7660): cover.

† Delamothe T. NHS at 60: a fairly happy birthday. *BMJ* 2008; 337: a524.

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July MJA BookClub Winners

Congratulations to: Dr M Hoopmann, Nuriootpa, SA; Dr J Griffiths, Wallan, Vic; and Dr A Hooper, Lismore, NSW. Each have won one set of four Anatomical Charts. The winners were drawn by Carol Feillafe, AMPCo's Receptionist. Thanks to everyone who purchased books from the July MJA BookClub and went into the draw. To see this month's MJA BookClub's great offers, see page 248 and the inside back cover of this issue.

