Pre-election series

Seeing clearly for better health

New directions in health care will be needed beyond this year’s federal election, with a matching vision of a healthier future from both major contestants.

At 2 pm on Monday, 17 June 2013, His Holiness the Dalai Lama arrived at Westmead Hospital in Sydney, not as a patient (thank goodness) but as a distinguished guest. Surrounded by a swirl of 10 police escort motorcycles and four security cars worthy of President Jed Bartlet from The West Wing. His Holiness landed and then embraced, smiled at and bestowed long white silk scarves upon the members of his welcoming party.

Security men spoke into tiny microphones at their wrists, and freaked out as the Dalai Lama strode into the waiting crowds. Dozens of cameras clicked as he made his way to the overflowing John Loewenthal Auditorium for a colloquium on current ethical questions — about individual and social responsibility in a world loaded with inequality, about Indigenous health and the interface between politics and health care. In welcoming him, I remarked that I could not imagine gathering an audience of this size to discuss our budget. The audience smiled their agreement and then they listened and questioned.

No doubt the Dalai Lama has his own political agenda. But for an hour on that wintry afternoon, staff who each day commit their lives to caring for others were inspired by his warm humour and canny pragmatism. Not by his politics, not by his grasp of economics, but by the optimism he exuded, by his spirituality and goodwill, how to increase mutual understanding and shared objectives.”

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The health reforms of the past 4 years and consider what has been achieved, and what has not been achieved. Importantly, we need to use that discussion to know what we need to do next.

We can have a vision and plan to transform it into action and results. But policies are not neat prose or detailed architectural plans to be easily and faithfully followed. Public policy formation is a complex phenomenon, with many players and multiple agendas unfolding. As a way forward, evidence from the real world may be a more defined and stable base from which to work. For this reason, many of us yearn for more evidence-based policy. But as social scientist Brian Head argues, the idea of “evidence-based” policy can be challenged and may be an unrealistic expectation.1

Policy debate and decision making are inherently political and value-based. “Policy decisions are not deduced primarily from facts and empirical models”, Head states, “but from politics, judgement and debate. Policy domains are inherently marked by the interplay of facts, norms and desired actions. Some policy settings are data-resistant owing to governmental commitments.”

Evidence-based policy is also challenged because “information is perceived and used in different ways, by actors looking through different ‘lenses’. From this perspective, there is more than one type of relevant ‘evidence’”. Head speaks of “three lenses” of evidence — political know-how, systematic research, and professional practice. “The three-lenses approach suggests that there may be importantly divergent perspectives on whether and how to increase mutual understanding and shared objectives.”

So policy may not yield all the results we seek, but we can at least be clear about what we, as health care professionals, value and wish to see enhanced.

Competing interests: No relevant disclosures.

Provenance: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.