However, fuelled by having medical bulk-billing and the right to a public hospital bed, the community often mistakenly expects “universal” to mean “free”. Community rating remains an article of faith. Australia thus possesses a universal health scheme whereby the government is the ultimate paymaster — and hence the “fount of all funding” — and the pressures for continued expenditure increasingly displace concerns with cost-effectiveness.

Thomas Hobbes in 1651 published his treatise entitled *Leviathan: or the matter, forme and power of a common-wealth ecclesiasticall and civil*. Written during the English Civil War, it concerns society and how it might be managed by a strong and united government (the Leviathan), averting war and avoiding anarchy. The treatise is riddled with allusions to the functioning of the human body — and if Leviathan becomes ill, beware! Hobbes wrote of a disease of a Treasury out of control that resembles what he called pleurisy — “too much abundance” concentrated in too few hands, in the way that Hobbes thought blood to be concentrated in pleurisy with its consequent inflammation and pain.3

Australia is now subject to a rampant health Leviathan, where order is missing and anarchy prevails, destroying virtue. Our Leviathan threatens to devour our national wealth. While the “military-industrial complex” has had in the past a Leviathan-like quality in the United States, defence now accounts for but 4% of the gross domestic product (GDP), while health approaches 18%. When Nimmo wrote his report, health represented about 4% of Australia’s GDP; it now approaches 10%.

The first Nimmo Report came at the right time, but Leviathan had yet to emerge; the next Nimmo will have to face the Leviathan, asking “What price immortality?”

Competing interests: No relevant disclosures.

Provenance: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.


Poem

The anatomy lesson: resection

You didn’t know what to do with the wisdom teeth so you saved them for a while for nothing, or what to think of the ganglion cyst — smooth, benign — they removed from the wrist just above the pulse. And then there was the first biopsy of the cervix, a plug the size of a pencil eraser they said, and that mole you’d had all your life they of a sudden called suspicious, and the nuisance the gall bladder became, and the thyroid gland. But it is the tumour in the gut that gets everyone’s attention its slow, mute explosion in the liver. This time, you are the anatomy lesson, your surgery a sharper degree of difficulty. Starched bleached, their names newly stitched on crisp lapels, the medical students file in and listen; they write things down. They observe the operation; there is a quiz, a test; you are the exam; what they can access of you theatre — now — in the surround —; you are the text, the close reading and radical revision, the offensive part lifted out and taken away in a pan fetus-like — that kind of measure, that kind of heft. Only they can tell you when you return to them what you can live without, what regenerates and on hearing it you feel a lightening, the way a snake must on slipping through its discarded mouth into another year, or, knowing nothing of a year, into time itself.

Claudia Emerson
Professor of English
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va, USA.
cuemerson@vcu.edu
doi: 10.5694/mja14.00248