Democratic Governance and Health: Hospitals, Politics and Health Policy in New Zealand
By M. J. Laugesen & R Gauld

Laugesen and Gauld have produced a fascinating and very readable account of political involvement in the design of New Zealand health services. Once the scene is set, by briefly comparing the organisation and funding of New Zealand’s health services with that of other developed countries, the book guides the reader through the development of elected health boards in New Zealand from the 1920s to the modern day, interweaving political involvement along the way. The concluding chapter discusses lessons learnt through this analysis and asks the question of whether elected health boards are the best tool for the organisation of an efficient, responsive health service.

For those not interested in modern history or politics, the book sounds as though it would be hard work and potentially irrelevant to the current delivery of health services. However, one of the key strengths of this book is that it paints a picture of what local health boards represent to local communities “The endurance of hospital boards suggests they embodied community values” (page 165). Boards are also formulated as an ‘institution’ “infused with value and symbolises community aspirations and sense of identity” (page 166). As such, to reduce the involvement of hospital boards in health service delivery, as many governments attempted, was a tumultuous process.

When writing this book, it would have been very easy for Laugesen and Gauld to take a political or ideological stance. However, the book is well balanced, presenting the influence of local politics (including business people and advocates) as well as national politicians, the Department of Health, Treasury and successive ‘taskforce’ groups. As highlighted, each of these stakeholders have influenced the number of boards, central vs regional or local service planning and delivery, and attempting to reduce the fiscal burden of the health service. Also of interest is the degree to which centre left or centre right New Zealand governments have benefited from the environment created by the preceding government to implement incremental change. The process by which change has occurs highlights the degree to which successive New Zealand governments agreed with the direction required, yet which the community has not been prepared to accept.

The second half of Democratic Governance and Health provides a more detailed discussion of the impact of having elected officials, who may not have the required experience, guiding service design and delivery. This is an honest evaluation of the problems faced when the ‘right’ person is not on the board, resulting in issues such as fraud and lack of clinical governance and clinical leadership. However, there is also an acknowledgement of perceived political manipulation when hospital boards are appointed, resulting in public dissatisfaction with the health service.

The authors aspire for the book to be a launch-pad for “greater political scrutiny and societal debate about the merits and shortcomings of the representative model and its alternatives” (page 171). They also suggest giving the public the opportunity to review the model and the potential to hold a referendum on the issue. These are lofty goals, especially given that the authors also acknowledge that, although the general public appear wedded to the institution, only a small proportion engage, either through voting for hospital board members or by attending board meetings. Perhaps a less lofty aspiration is to require every member of parliament to read this book, understand how closely aligned they are, and agree on a cross government approach to service structure and delivery.

As highlighted at the start of this review, this is a concise and readable review of the place of hospital boards in health service delivery in New Zealand. It would be of interest for students who were intending to practice medicine in New Zealand, as well as political science students and members of the public with aspirations for serving on hospital boards. It is also so well written that it will be of interest to people with even a passing interest in health service design and parochial loyalties in New Zealand.