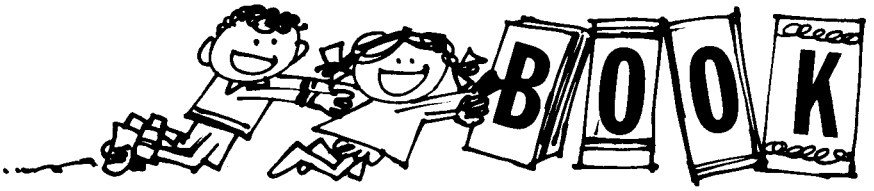
Book Review Editor
Ruth Stewart



CHARGING FOR SOCIAL CARE

By Ken Judge and James Mathews
150 pp
George Allen and Unwin
London, 1980
Hardback $32.50
Paperback $12.95

"Charging for social care" attempts to bring some reason to the awkward and rarely covered issue of how to set prices for publicly provided welfare services.

Unfortunately, despite a thorough coverage of the book's terms of reference, the reader comes away feeling not particularly enlightened.

The book is in fact an expanded version of a report by two academics for the British Department of Health and Social Security. The author's aim is to gather data on the pricing of a number of welfare services and comment on the development, and present state, of pricing policy for such services.

The authors highlight the fact that charges are used very frequently in the provision of local govenment welfare services, for a variety of reasons, including to keep costs down and to discourage overuse of the service. They show that prices have varied quite dramatically from one local government to another.

The study attempts to unravel the various types of subsidy that may be applied to welfare services and use economic theory to suggest appropriate charges to meet specific social policy objectives.

The book's weakness lies in its very narrow and technical focus. As a result the recommendations shed very little light: the authors note that there are anomalies between local authorities, that charging structures and objectives need to be re-examined and that more research in the area is needed. A slightly more interesting result was the need to consider who is actually paying subsidies for welfare services and whether it is the role of local authorities or federal government to pay subsidies which are in effect a form of income maintenance.

Some questions though, are never raised, let alone answered. For example, the advantages and disadvantages of *not* charging are never addressed. It is clear from a number of comments through the book (e.g. p.138, p.140) that the authors are proponents of charges and either hope, or at least expect, that they will increase or be used more frequently in the future. On p.138 the authors say they "...expect that rising relative incomes for elderly clients will increase consumer choice and ease the burden of financing the growth of personal social services."

The book is based (implicitly) on the premise that welfare services are a necessary financial drain providing little, if any benefit for the community as a whole. As a result the authors fit very easily into the mould of Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Fraser, or even the 'small government' back-benchers of the Australian Federal Government.

The failure to tackle the costs and benefits of cost-cutting and service cutting is particularly worrying when it is clear that the book was written at a time when Margaret Thatcher was cutting great swathes through welfare services and increasing charges with scant regard for social policy objectives.

Likewise, for an Australian reader, the book offers no explanation of the impact of increasing charges for community sevices. At a time of 'small government' rhetoric, the trend is to increase charges on a user-pays basis and cut back services. It is critical that the impact of such policies on the community be addressed.

The result is that one is let down by this book. In pursuit of "academic objectivity", it divorces its subject matter from its context. Consequently it fails to come to terms with the likely impact of current policies, or with broader issues of distribution of services and resources, universal versus selective services, or the appropriateness of existing services. Rather than assuming the challenge was to develop appropriate pricing structures for traditional welfare services, perhaps it would have been fruitful to consider the costs and benefits of developing more appropriate methods of meeting the same needs — self-help, consumer control, the provision of skills and information on existing services, to name but a few.

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Fathers At Home.

By Jan Harper, Penguin Books Australia 1980. $5.50, 256 pages.

This is a very important and timely book. It is a very common notion that social research is only respectable if it involves large probability samples and sophisticated statistical analysis. This is of course far from the truth. Social surveys are useful for many purposes, but they rarely contribute much to the generation of new ideas, new aspects of theory or even to new facts about the behaviour of isolated or unusual groups. Innovative research is usually qualitative, selective, speculative and exciting. Jan Harper obviously enjoyed the piece of research reported in this book.

Fathers at home reports the experiences of fifteen couples in which the father stayed at home to provide care for children and do other tasks about the home while mothers attended work or studied. Eight of the fathers are major contributions to the book, seven have less but varying degrees of involvement in the project. The experience of these fathers and their families make interesting reading. The problems of the stay-at-home parent take on a new perspective when related by people (in this case men) who have not been

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