

**Whose priorities?**  
**Statistics for health and health care**

Themes and activities  
Using the past to inform the future  
Alison Macfarlane

# Radical Statistics Health Group

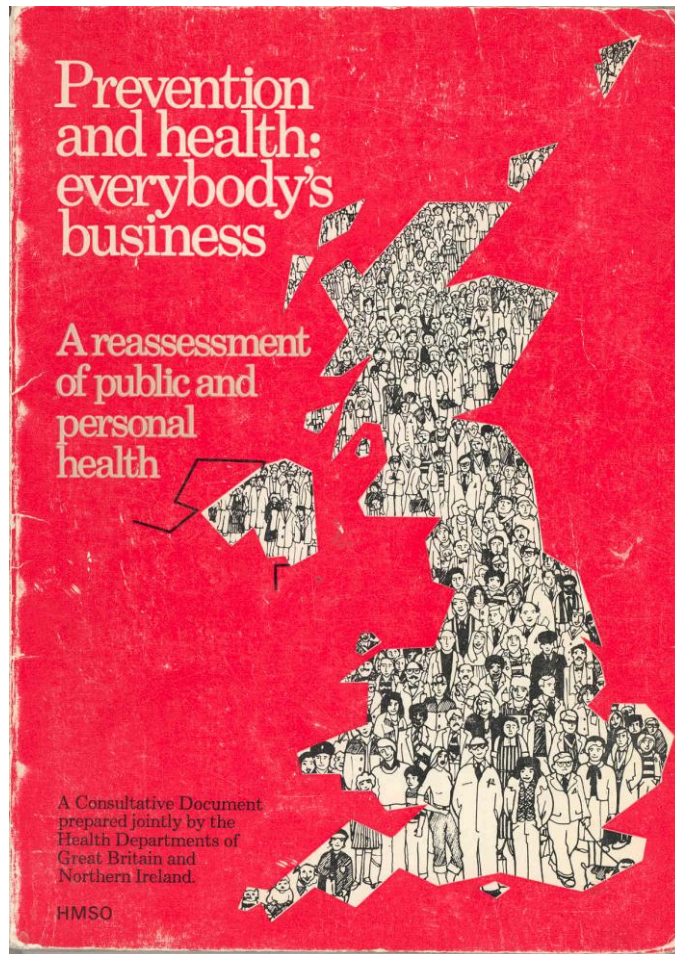
Radical Statistics was formed in 1975 initiated by researchers and statisticians, who had been at LSE together in 1968 and planned to meet as subgroups

A meeting took place in April 1976 to revive the 'dormant health group'

Meeting with speakers from Industrial Health Hazards Group of British Society for Social Responsibility in Science (BSSRS) with whom there was overlap in membership. Used BSSRS postal address and subsequently affiliated.

Critique of two government health policy documents

# Prevention and health: everybody's business



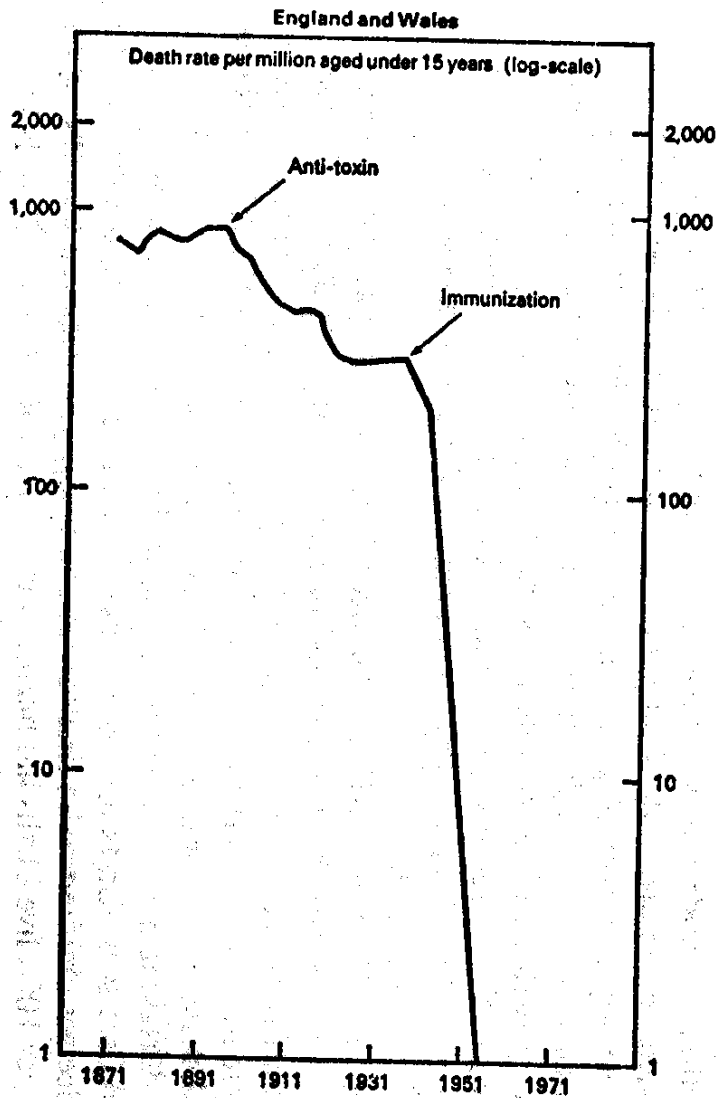
Onus on individuals to  
'look after themselves'

Little mention of social  
causes of ill health or  
need to 'refocus  
upstream'

Misleading presentations  
of statistics

# Misleading use of logarithmic scales

Childhood mortality from diphtheria, 1871-1971 Fig. C



Reproduced from figure 2.2 in (2).

Childhood mortality from diphtheria, 1871-1971 Fig. D

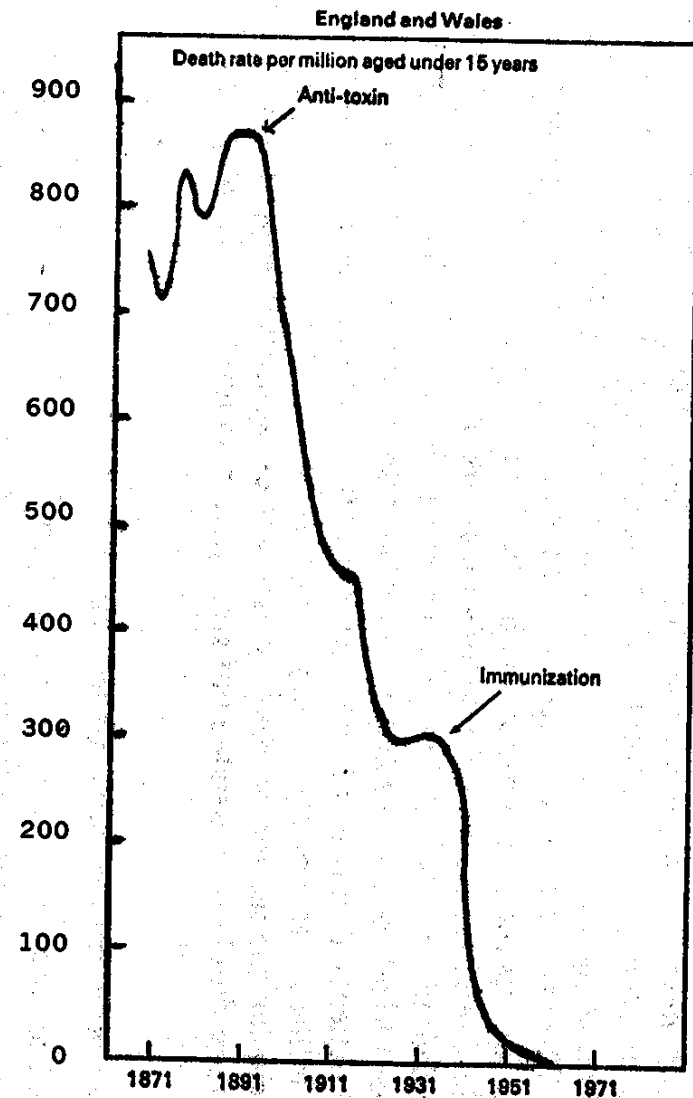
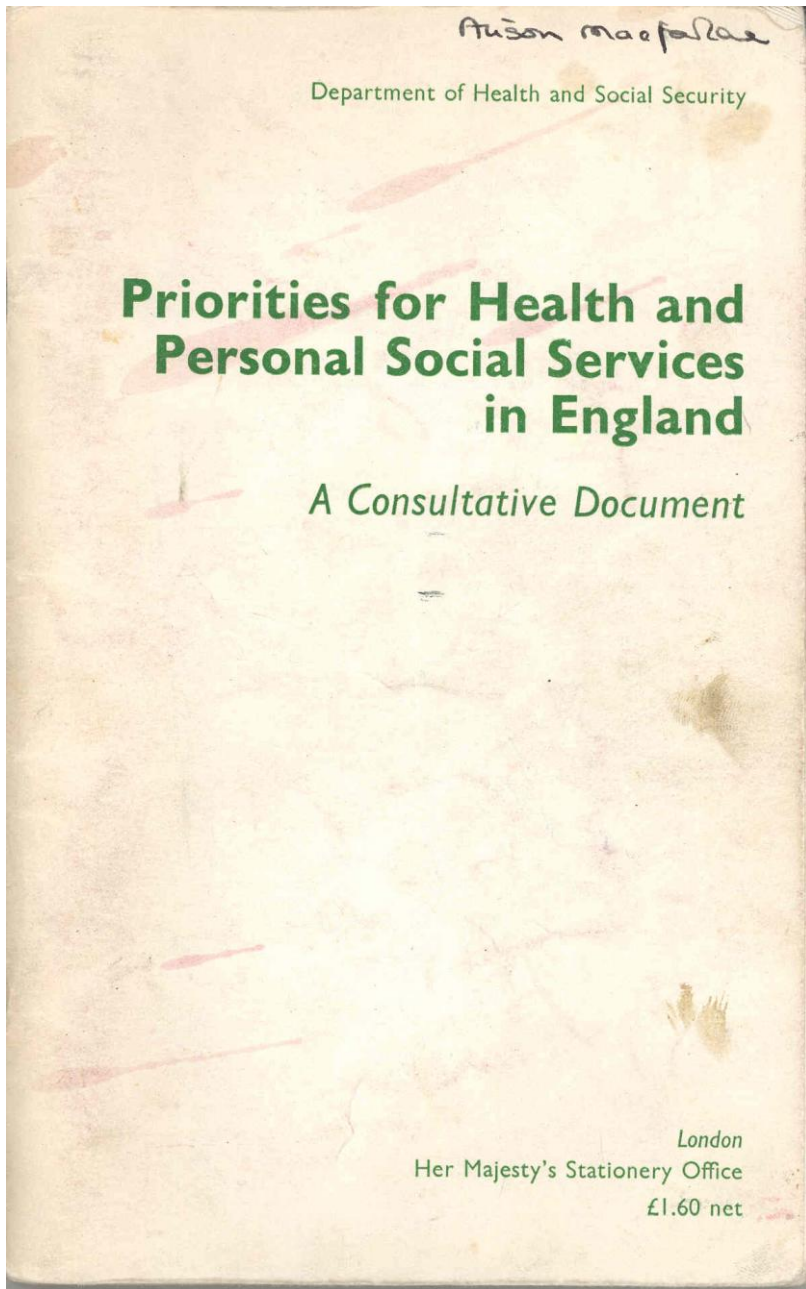


Figure 2.2 in (2) redrawn on a linear scale.



**The first programme budget:**  
Acute and maternity services should be cut to finance growth in so-called 'priority services', primary care, services for elderly people and people with mental illness and learning disabilities and prevention.

Policies possibly worthy but data to support them happening were limited and unconvincing.

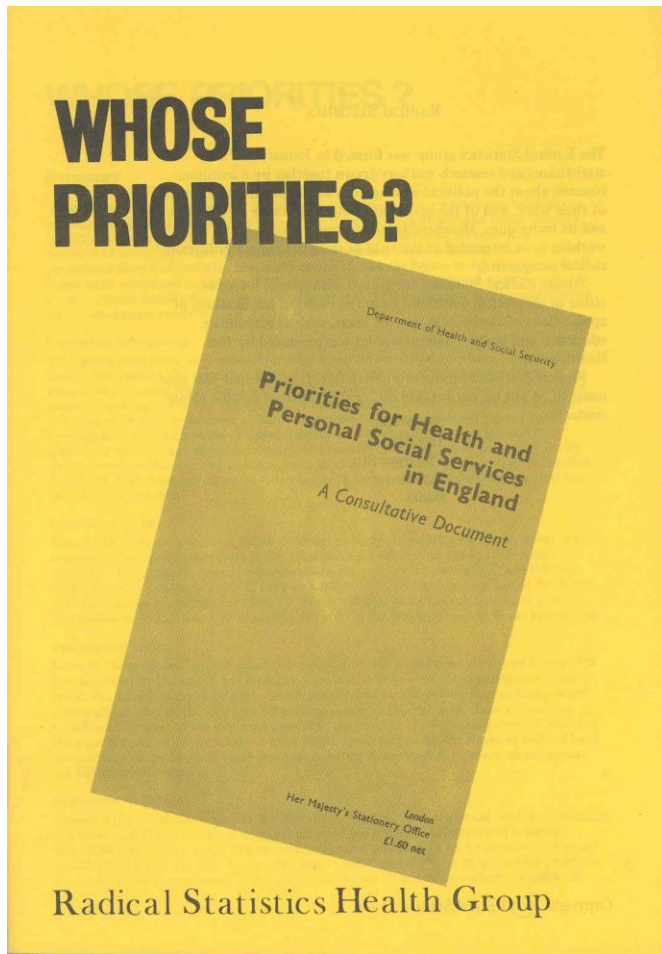
Department of Health and Social Security, 1976



# Whose priorities?

Self published in 1976 via alternative press

‘These documents give little hope that genuinely new initiatives will come from the DHSS. Whatever the initial intentions behind their publication, it now seems likely that consultation ... is likely to prove anything more than a smokescreen for the cuts.’



# **Further Radical Statistics Health Group publications**

## **In defence of the NHS, 1977**

Paying for medical care

Fees, prescription charges, proposals for private health insurance

The effectiveness of medical practice

The medical profession

## **RAW(P) deals, 1977**

A critique of 'Sharing resources for health in England'

# **‘Unsafe in their hands’**

Norman Fowler’s leaflet misusing statistics to claim the NHS was flourishing, 1985

- More patients treated

- More hospital (schemes)

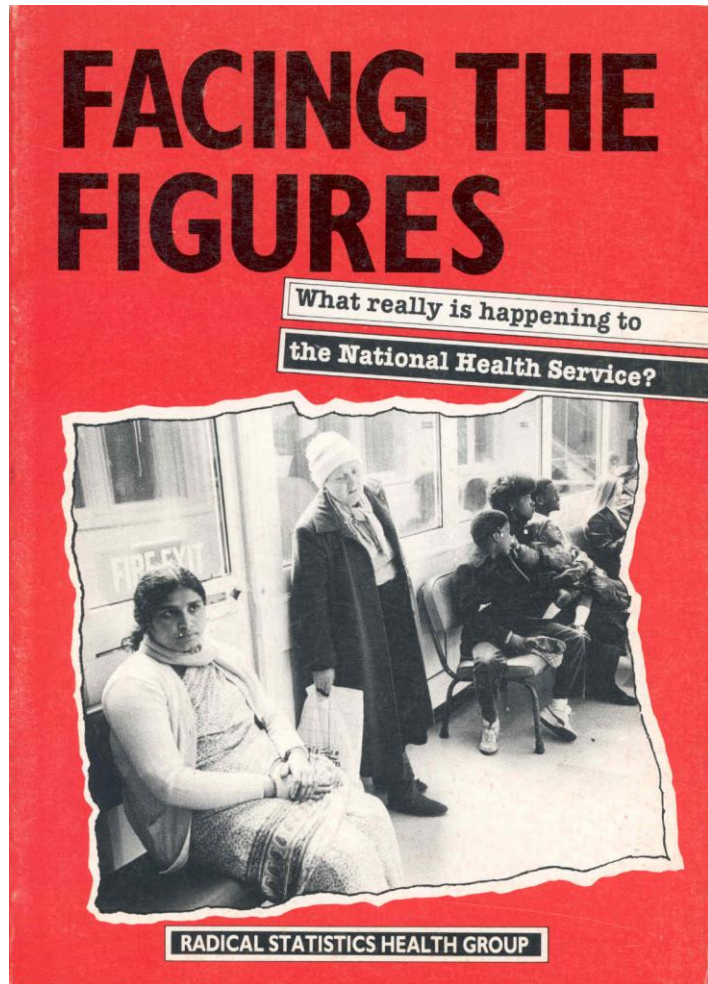
- More staff

- Shorter waiting lists

‘Unsafe in their hands’ published by Radical Statistics as typescript to be copied on ‘fanzine’ principles



# Facing the figures, 1987



More in-depth version of critique of government health statistics.

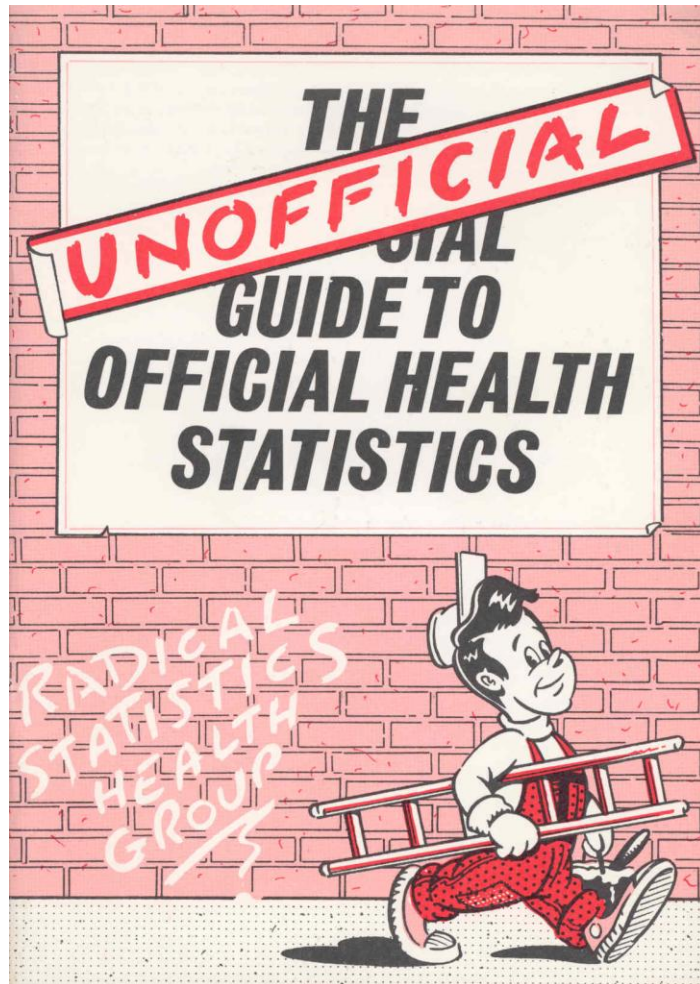
Published just before 1987 general election and ignored as too detailed

Later used for

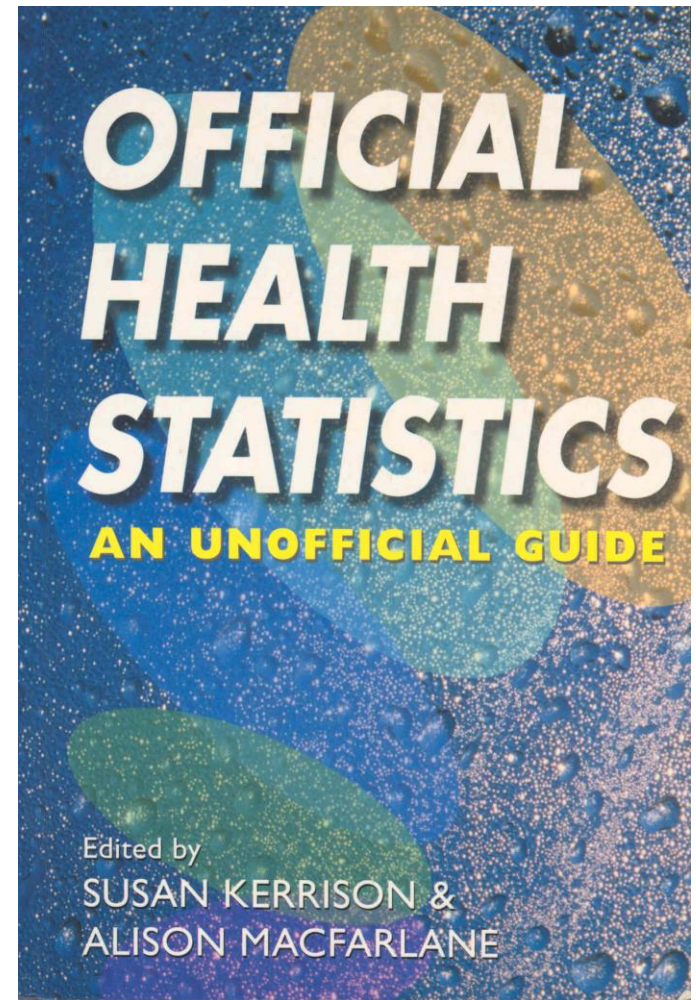
Channel Four Despatches programme, 'Cooking the books'

High profile articles in the Independent

Helped trigger changes to a more independent statistical service.



1980



2000

# Themes, past, present and future

Public health – social and political causes of ill health

How well is the NHS doing?

Funding the NHS. Can we afford it?

Use of statistics as a smokescreen

Availability of statistics.

Cuts, non-publication, privatisation of analyses

# Communication

## **1970s and 1980s**

Pamphlets and books. Do-it-yourself publication

‘Fanzine’

## **1990s**

Articles in radical and mainstream publications run by others

## **2000s onwards**

Email, web site, social media – but do we use them effectively?

What should we do in the future?

Health group no longer exists as such

Is Radical Statistics still needed? If so, for what?

Are others doing it now instead of us? What should we do?

# The future

# BSSRS and the Radical Science Movement, late 1970s

## Who are our allies now?

