

Whose priorities? Using the past to inform the future: Statistics for health and health care

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I joined Radical Statistics when it was formed in 1975. Many of the people who convened the inaugural meeting had been at LSE together in 1968 but I was one of those who had missed out on those heady experiences. Having got together, we did not have a clear plan about where to go next, so it was decided to meet as subject-based subgroups.

Unlike some of the founding members who were more concerned with abstract discussions of statistics, the Health Group consisted of statisticians and people from other disciplines who actively used statistics. After holding a few desultory meetings, we ground to a halt. Then, as reported in Radical Statistics, a meeting took place in April 1976 to revive the 'dormant health group'. This took the form of a meeting with speakers from the Industrial Health Hazards Group of the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science (BSSRS) with whom there was overlap in membership. Radical Statistics started to use BSSRS' postal address as it had an office in 9 Poland Street, a building which provided space for radical groups and then we affiliated to BSSRS.

After this meeting, we decided to focus on exposing and debunking misleading uses of statistics in the health field. Two government documents, a health promotion document, 'Prevention and health: everybody's business' and 'Priorities for Health and Personal Social Services in England:' the first attempt to set out a programme budget for the NHS spurred us into action. It became clear to us in discussion that that the data in the documents did not support the claims in the text and we developed and wrote a critique of the documents.

One of the group lived in a squat in West Hampstead with a friendly collective of anarchist typesetters and printers. They helped us publish our critique of the two documents as a pamphlet 'Whose priorities?' which we distributed by post and the alternative press. It was reviewed by the medical press and in publications of campaigning groups and even made it into the national press. We quickly sold out and had to get more copies printed

The success of 'Whose priorities' fuelled our enthusiasm. The government had set up a Royal Commission on the NHS, which we

anticipated would be presented with 'evidence' urging privatisation of the NHS, so we wrote a pamphlet 'In defence of the NHS. This countered the arguments already being made at the time, in favour of paying for medical care and included critiques of fees, prescription charges, and proposal proposals for private health insurance. We published this in 1977 and sent in to the Royal Commission as well as distributing it in the same ways as 'Whose priorities?'

In parallel with this, we turned to NHS resource allocation in a Pamphlet RAW(P) deals, critiquing 'Sharing resources for health in England', the first NHS resource allocation formula, published in 1977. Although we supported a fairer sharing of resources between NHS regions, we found that the proposed formula was statistically flawed.

After this, we felt that instead of just debunking material produced by officialdom, we should write something positive ourselves, but our ideas were so ambitious and nebulous that we never managed to get them together. As a by-product of our attempts to do this, we did manage to produce 'The unofficial guide to official health statistics', which was widely used, especially as there was no official guide.

The people involved in these projects worked in a variety of places, including universities, voluntary groups and the Government Statistical Service. The pamphlets and associated articles were published under the collective authorship of Radical Statistics Health Group. This was well before the era of word processing and pamphlets were produced were produced by pasting together typeset text, then copies were made and distributed by post or through alternative bookshops by a specialist distributor. We also produced articles, usually collectively authored for alternative magazines and sometimes medical and nursing publications.

After a lull we were spurred back into action in 1985 when Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Health and Social Services distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of a leaflet, which claimed through misleading use of statistics, that the NHS was safe in his party's hands. We wanted to circulate our response, debunking claims of more patients treated, more hospitals with more staff and shorter waiting lists more quickly than could be achieved by putting together a printed pamphlet. We therefore produced a typescript which we circulated on the same lines as 'fanzines' produced by followers of pop groups of that era. This involved posting photocopies to key contacts and inviting them to photocopy them and pass them on, with an invitation to recipients to do likewise. This method of circulation was effective and our arguments were quoted by national and specialist press, health campaigners, and

also by opposition politicians, including by Shadow Secretary of State for Social Services, Michael Meacher in a parliamentary debate.

We then went on to develop a much more in-depth version of our arguments as a critique 'Facing the figures' to show how government health statistics were being misused to present an over-optimistic picture of the state of the health service. It was published just before 1987 general election and ignored at the time as being too detailed for use in an election campaign. On the other hand, it had an impact, a few months later when it formed the basis of a Channel Four Despatches programme, 'Cooking the books' and a series of high profile articles in the Independent by investigative journalist, Rosie Waterhouse.. These raised concern about the way Government used statistics and helped trigger changes which eventually led to a more independent statistical service.

After that, from the 1990s onwards, we mainly concentrated in writing articles in journals and magazines. Our final book, 'Official statistics: an unofficial guide' was the only one published by a commercial publisher, which included it in its nursing list and sold only about 700 copies compared with the 4,000 copies we sold of 'Facing the figures' and of the first edition of the Unofficial Guide.

Radical Statistics Health Group no longer exists as such but the issues are still with us, perhaps in more acute forms. Public health is being presented as ways of individual health promotion rather than taking account of the social and political causes of ill health. Misleading indicators are being used to make claims about how health services are doing. Claims are being made that we can't afford health services which are free at the point of use. The availability of statistics is still an important issue, including cuts, non-publication, non-availability for research analyses and the privatisation of analyses. Overall, statistics are still often being used as smokescreens rather than signposts.

What has changed dramatically is the means of communication available. With current technology, we should be able to communicate more widely, but are we able to use the social media, web sites and email as effectively as we used the old technology of 'envelope stuffing' and 'paste up' using scalpels and 'Cow gum'?

For most of us, involvement in the Health Group as in Radical Statistics generally has been a different activity from what we do in our 'day jobs', although it drew on the knowledge gained through them. It has been argued that these days people are under greater pressure and so unable to make time for additional work which does not help their career and

may even get them into trouble, as some of us did as a result of involvement with Radical Statistics..

Furthermore, there are now ‘fact checking’ organisations, whose paid job is to look critically at the way politicians use statistics. Do these obviate the need for Radical Statistics? At this year’s conference, Will Moy, director of Full Fact, which is perhaps one of the best known of these organisations, pointed out a key difference between his organisation and Radical Statistics. Full Fact sees itself as politically neutral, while Radical Statistics has looked at statistics from a political perspective and interpreted in the light of questions about how they come to be produced. We have argued that government and other statistics are not ‘facts’ but the product of decisions made about what to collect and what not to collect, how to collect, classify and analyse data, what to publish and how and what not to publish. This perspective is needed as much now as in the past and we have both the skills and the insights which can be used to make change. Like Ludi, I have found this enjoyable and engaging and hope that new members will enjoy getting involved in the future and contribute fresh insights to the process.

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