The need to demonstrate satisfactory performance is a common requirement of health agencies, including those engaged in health promotion activity. Performance is variously defined, but is increasingly concerned with meeting the health needs of the community in a way that represents value for money. Suitable priority-setting approaches are being sought that will achieve greater efficiency in the allocation of scarce health promotion resources at the local and national levels. The promise of this book 'to demonstrate how economics can provide a framework within which priorities can be set' will thus be welcomed. The author states that the final chapter proposes a framework for use by health promotion agencies and policy makers in developing future policies and strategies to ensure that, irrespective of the level of resources available, they are utilised in such a way as to maximise the benefits to society. (p. 13)

The reader seeking that framework may well be disappointed. The book is divided into two distinct sections. The first section, Chapters 1–4, provides an introduction to economics, priority setting and economic evaluation. The second section, Chapters 5–12, provides a brief summary of a small number of studies or reviews of interventions for addressing health promotion priority areas of alcohol, drugs, exercise, mental health, nutrition, safety, sexuality and smoking.

The exposition of the economic problem, that of scarce resources in the face of unlimited wants, the nature of markets and the concept of efficiency is clear. The chapter on priority setting provides a useful introduction to a number of approaches, highlighting their limitations, with a slightly more comprehensive description of program budgeting and marginal analysis. Curiously, cost-effectiveness analysis is said not to be relevant for priority setting (p. 16), even though it is a common technique used for this purpose and is the more general form of cost–utility analysis, which is promoted in this text.

Chapter 4 provides a more comprehensive description of economic evaluation techniques. While the exposition is clear, as noted, it is the topic of a number of well-regarded texts. Attempts to relate economic evaluation issues to the health promotion context are few. An exception is a confusing discussion of the question of whether prevention is better than cure. The failure to note that the answer depends on the particular programs is surprising. Both preventive and curative programs can, on the one hand, be highly cost-effective or, on the other hand, deleterious.

The issue of potential savings in downstream health care costs is also discussed. It is a benefit of many health promotion programs and warrants a place in this text. The standard approach for incorporation of expected reduction in downstream health service use is through the calculation of a net cost-effectiveness (or net cost/QALY) ratio. Net cost is defined as implementation cost less present value of expected savings in future health care resources. This technique is not referred to in the text. Instead the 'policy space' concept is introduced, which incorporates two decision rules: that programs be funded that yield health benefits and reduce net health care costs; and that programs not be funded that reduce health benefits and increase health care costs. No decision rule is given for the majority of programs that generate some additional benefits at some additional cost.

The second section of the book provides a summary of a number of studies of the effectiveness or cost-effectiveness of interventions...
targeted at one of the eight topic areas. It does not draw on the first section of the text, with each study reviewed in isolation and the decision rule for support of particular programs unclear. The choice of studies is curious: given the large literature, it is not clear how the four or so studies on each topic have been selected. The attempt to draw conclusions from the studies to guide policy-makers tends to be trite and sometimes contradictory with the stated evidence.

For instance in summarising the study by Beales and Kopelman (1994), a review covering a range of weight control studies, Phillips notes that ‘most treatment programs would achieve the necessary outcomes (10% weight reduction maintained for a five year period)’ (p. 77). Yet in drawing out the relevance of the study for health agencies, the author concludes that

the effectiveness and efficiency of secondary and tertiary prevention measures in a problem area such as obesity remains inconclusive and therefore policies should be directed at primary prevention measures to prevent the problem occurring in the first place. (p. 78)

While primary prevention may well be the strategy of choice for this problem in an ideal world, the author does not provide any form of economic evaluation to support this conclusion.

The final chapter provides some general principles to assist decision-makers, which are non-controversial, but fall far short of the promised priority setting framework. Hence this is ultimately a disappointing book, which, while it includes a reasonable exposition of economics and priority setting techniques, fails to link this adequately to priority setting for health promotion. It neither provides a ‘how to’ nor a critical review of attempts at priority setting. Some may find the summary of the health economics literature useful, but the basis for the choice of studies in the second section of the book and their place within the wider literature is difficult to gauge.

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REFERENCES


The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy
Richard M. Titmuss, original edition with new chapters, A. Oakley and J. Ashton (eds)

If Richard Titmuss were alive, he would probably have appreciated the fact that the new edition of his classic book The Gift Relationship was published in the same year that a new Labour government was elected. In 1959, Titmuss gave an address titled ‘The Irresponsible Society’ in which he expressed his moral indignation about what he saw as the ‘retreat from government’ by the ruling Conservative Party. He did not know then what the future held, or what the term ‘Thatcherism’ would come to mean.

The Gift Relationship was first published in 1970, 3 years before Titmuss’s early death at age 65. It was his last and perhaps most influential book. This new edition retains the original text, less obviously out of date material. The new edition has an Introduction written by the editors—Titmuss’s daughter, the feminist writer and sociologist Ann Oakley, and John Ashton of Healthy Cities fame; a chapter on the National Blood Transfusion Service in the UK which covers the period since Titmuss’s book was first written; and a chapter on human milk donation. There is also an Afterword by Julian Le Grand, now Richard Titmuss Professor of Health Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The new material brings the book up to date with regard to many of the issues related to HIV/AIDS and blood transfusion. It also, and perhaps even more importantly, highlights the relevance of Titmuss’s moral arguments for an era dominated by public choice theory, economic rationalism and ‘marketised health and welfare services’.

As Oakley and Ashton point out in their Introduction, The Gift Relationship is ‘ostensibly a comparative study of blood donation in the UK and the USA, but underlying this is a much more general argument about the place of altruism in human affairs’.

Titmuss argues, contrary to prevailing economic theory, that the encouragement and recognition of altruism—through what might be
termed in current jargon a ‘partnership’ between altruistic citizens and a responsive public sector—can achieve, at least in some areas, real economic benefits.

What Titmuss’s research showed with regard to the economics of blood donation and transfusion services in Britain and the US respectively, is cleverly captured in the following passage from an American review of the first edition of the book in 1971, quoted in Oakley and Ashton’s introduction (p. 5):

For a lesson in modern political economy, consider the trade in doolb. In the land of Niatirb, the suppliers of this vital economy receive no pay, and its processing and distribution are in the hands of government bureaucrats. In Acirema, by contrast, nearly all doolb supplies receive cash or other tangible, individual incentives, and much of the processing and distribution is carried out for profit. Obviously, Acireman doolb supplies will be higher in quality, lower in price, more accurately attuned to demand, and involve far less wastage—right? Wrong.

In addition to its persuasive moral and economic arguments, The Gift Relationship is also remarkable for the breadth and quality of Titmuss’s research. Despite being considered the founder of modern public administration, and holding a chair for more than 20 years at the London School of Economics, Titmuss had no university education. With no disciplinary straightjacket, for The Gift Relationship Titmuss drew freely on a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, and on the insights of anthropology, philosophy, sociology, history, economics and literature.

Titmuss’s short case studies of commercial blood donor centres in ghettos in the United States are truly shocking; the unedited responses of British blood donors to the question ‘could you say why you first decided to become a blood donor’ are truly moving.

Two years prior to the publishing of The Gift Relationship, economists at the Institute of Economic Affairs in London had argued for the introduction of payment of donors and competition for blood in Britain. Titmuss provides several quotes from this publication, including the statement that: ‘a movement towards more efficiency in the blood market is a movement towards more efficiency in the economy as a whole’ (p. 220). Not only was this wrong economically, Titmuss argued, it was wrong in the impact it would have on the quality of blood and infection rates. It would also mean the loss of an opportunity to ‘institutionalise altruism’ and hence of a broader moral framework ‘which encourages people to care for one another’ (p. 8).

Many of the points made by Titmuss have a resonance with current thinking about the concept of social capital. Based on his studies of regional Italy, political scientist Robert Putnam (1993) has argued that communities with high levels of trust and social solidarity do well in a wide range of other respects, for example in health status, in economic development and in overall quality of life. With the high level of interest in social capital and its relevance for health promotion, this new publication of The Gift Relationship is timely, and may help bring Titmuss’s ideas and sense of moral values to a new audience.

Politicians of all political persuasions are also encouraged to read it. However, one wonders how many will react like Kostoglotov, a character in Solzhenitsyn’s novel Cancer Ward, from which Titmuss quotes. Shulubin, a cancer patient, tells Kostoglotov that there are convincing arguments that an economy could and should be built on an ethical basis. ‘What’s that? Ethics first and economics afterwards?’ Kostoglotov looked bewildered’ (p. 273).

We all still have much to learn from Richard Titmuss.

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