

Health Policy & Systems Reading List

# The Social Transformation of American Medicine (Paul Starr, 1982)

## Executive Summary

Starr’s Pulitzer Prize–winning book provides a sweeping sociological and historical analysis of how American physicians consolidated authority and autonomy, shaping the modern U.S. medical system. It traces the rise of professional sovereignty, the role of institutions, and the tension between markets and government. The book remains foundational in understanding the political economy of healthcare.

## Geopolitical Context

Published during the Reagan era, when deregulation and privatization dominated political discourse. Healthcare costs were rising, and debates centered on whether government or the private sector should lead reform. Starr’s insights offered a historical framework for those grappling with market-oriented reforms and declining physician autonomy.

## Citation

Starr P. The Social Transformation of American Medicine. New York: Basic Books; 1982.

**Out of the Crisis (W. Edwards Deming, 1986)**

## Executive Summary

Deming’s text articulated his philosophy of quality improvement, rooted in systems thinking, variation, and continuous improvement. Although aimed broadly at industry, its principles were later adopted by healthcare leaders seeking to reduce errors and improve reliability. Deming’s work emphasized that systemic processes, not individual blame, drive outcomes.

## Geopolitical Context

Appeared at a time when U.S. industry was under pressure from global competition, particularly Japan, which had embraced Deming’s methods. Healthcare leaders began adapting these principles in the late 1980s and 1990s as the quality movement took hold. The book’s publication anticipated a shift toward accountability and measurement in healthcare delivery.

## Citation

Deming WE. Out of the Crisis. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; 1986.

**To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System (Institute of Medicine, 1999)**

## Executive Summary

This groundbreaking IOM report estimated that up to 98,000 Americans died annually from preventable medical errors. It reframed errors as systemic problems rather than individual failings and established patient safety as a central concern in healthcare. The report spurred accreditation reforms, reporting systems, and the creation of patient safety organizations.

## Geopolitical Context

Released during widespread dissatisfaction with managed care and growing recognition of U.S. underperformance despite high spending. The late 1990s also saw the rise of electronic health records and digital infrastructure as possible solutions to systemic shortcomings. The report galvanized policymakers, payers, and providers to prioritize safety in reform agendas.

## Citation

Kohn LT, Corrigan JM, Donaldson MS, eds. To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 1999.

**Redefining Health Care (Michael E. Porter & Elizabeth Teisberg, 2006)**

## Executive Summary

Porter and Teisberg introduced the concept of value-based competition in healthcare, arguing that competition should focus on outcomes and patient value rather than volume of services. The book provided a strategic framework for payers, providers, and policymakers to align incentives around quality and efficiency. It influenced the design of value-based purchasing and accountable care models.

## Geopolitical Context

Published in the prelude to the Affordable Care Act, at a time of mounting concerns over rising costs and uneven quality. Employers and insurers were seeking alternatives to fee-for-service models. The book anticipated reforms that would later emphasize bundled payments and accountability for outcomes.

## Citation

Porter ME, Teisberg EO. Redefining Health Care. Boston: Harvard Business School Press; 2006.

**The Best Practice (Charles Kenney, 2008)**

## Executive Summary

Kenney chronicled the stories of leading institutions and individuals driving the quality and safety movement in medicine. He highlighted the adoption of new practices inspired by Deming and the IOM reports. The book illustrated how culture change and leadership could embed quality improvement at the core of healthcare delivery.

## Geopolitical Context

Appeared as quality and safety became central to national healthcare debates, bridging the Bush and Obama administrations. The financial crisis underscored inefficiencies in the healthcare system, reinforcing the urgency of reform. Kenney’s work contextualized real-world applications of earlier theoretical frameworks.

## Citation

Kenney C. The Best Practice: How the New Quality Movement Is Transforming Medicine. Philadelphia: PublicAffairs; 2008.

**Designing Care (Richard M.J. Bohmer, 2009)**

## Executive Summary

Bohmer analyzed healthcare as a system of processes, exploring how organizational design affects quality, efficiency, and innovation. He argued that aligning the nature of care with its management was essential for improvement. The book emphasized systematic design of care pathways and organizational accountability.

## Geopolitical Context

Released during the global financial crisis and early Obama administration, as healthcare reform debates intensified. It resonated with calls for delivery system innovation and efficiency in the face of economic constraints. Its focus on process design connected directly to reform-era experiments with new models of care.

## Citation

Bohmer RMJ. Designing Care: Aligning the Nature and Management of Health Care. Boston: Harvard Business Press; 2009.

**The Heart of Power (David Blumenthal & James Morone, 2009)**

## Executive Summary

This book explored how U.S. presidents from FDR through George W. Bush shaped healthcare reform efforts. It examined the interplay of politics, personality, and policy in presidential leadership. Blumenthal and Morone demonstrated how executive power and political timing have historically defined reform outcomes.

## Geopolitical Context

Published as the Obama administration launched its reform campaign, the book provided timely historical parallels. It framed the ACA struggle within a broader narrative of presidential attempts at reform, from Truman’s national insurance push to Clinton’s failed effort. The book underscored the centrality of political leadership in shaping healthcare delivery.

## Citation

Blumenthal D, Morone J. The Heart of Power: Health and Politics in the Oval Office. Berkeley: University of California Press; 2009.

**Power, Politics, and Universal Health Care (Stuart Altman & David Shactman, 2011)**

## Executive Summary

Altman and Shactman examined the history of U.S. healthcare reform and the persistent barriers to universal coverage. They highlighted the roles of stakeholders, special interests, and political compromise in shaping outcomes. The book connected decades of policy struggles to the newly enacted ACA.

## Geopolitical Context

Released shortly after the ACA’s passage, amid fierce partisan battles over its implementation. The Tea Party movement was rising, and healthcare reform was a central political flashpoint. The book provided both historical grounding and contemporary relevance to the reform struggle.

## Citation

Altman SH, Shactman D. Power, Politics, and Universal Health Care. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books; 2011.

**Governing Health, 4th ed. (William G. Weissert & Carol S. Weissert, 2012)**

## Executive Summary

This authoritative text surveyed the institutions, processes, and politics of U.S. health policy. It offered comprehensive analysis of governance, federalism, and policy implementation. Widely used in teaching, the book provided readers with a framework to understand complex policy structures.

## Geopolitical Context

Published during ongoing battles over ACA implementation and the Supreme Court’s landmark decision upholding most of the law. The book offered clarity on the institutional dynamics that would shape the ACA’s survival and long-term impact. It provided a roadmap for understanding U.S. healthcare governance in a polarized era.

## Citation

Weissert WG, Weissert CS. Governing Health. 4th ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 2012.