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ACCELERATING CONTROL

An ethnographic account of the impact of micro-economic reform on the work of health professionals

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a sociological study that examines the way in which *time* is used to exert control over the work of health professionals. The thesis explores political, bureaucratic and managerial attempts to control the labour time of nurses and doctors in one public hospital in South Australia. The period covered is 1992–2000, a time characterised by Federal government bi-partisan initiatives to wind back the welfare state.

The study shows how political control was attempted through micro-economic strategies built into enterprise bargaining and the performance management strategies incorporated into Medicare, and casemix models of funding. Bureaucratic attempts at control are illustrated by the imposition of benchmarks for productivity, efficiency, quality and access, while managerial control is evident in the processes of constant workplace change. The account offered here draws on document analysis and focused ethnography to understand the impact of these changes on the work of nurses and doctors.

The response of hospital managers and health professionals to the ‘reforms’ introduced by the Commonwealth and State governments between 1992 and 2000 was to introduce a number of changes aimed at saving time. The thesis presents four case studies of five time-saving innovations introduced at Westernvale Hospital. These were: (1) a program to change the culture to up-skill, and intensifying the work; (2) the implementation of ‘Excelcare’, a computerised nursing workload product; (3) a nurse-managed clinical pathway program; (4) a Fast Track Surgery Project controlled by surgeons; and (5) the utilisation of the resource allocation tool: Program Budget and Marginal Analysis.

These attempts to control the labour time of health professionals were rarely completely successful. Resistance was evident through organised union activity via enterprise bargaining, through the use of evidence-based medicine and through gendered differences in responses to the innovations. It was also organised along professional lines. As a consequence the traditional doctor/nurse division of labour and associated medical dominance remained largely intact.

This exploration of the re-organisation of working time reveals much about the nature of time itself in capitalist society. It suggests that in human service workplaces in capitalist societies, subject as they are to budgetary constraints, time is predominantly abstract and empty. The

monetary value of the worker's hour is repeatedly reduced in order to create surplus value and to ensure continuous productivity and efficiency gains. The cultural predispositions supporting this approach to time can be found in the historical origins of capitalism: firstly in the Roman Catholic invention of Purgatory and later in the Protestant work ethic. Embedded in Purgatory and the Protestant ethic is the origin of a secular psychological predisposition, or *purgatorial complex*. This is a profound anxiety towards time in everyday life.