

**Ann McMahon PhD MSc BSc RMN RGN**

**The politics of innovation: a critical analysis of the conditions  
in which innovations in health care may flourish.**

**Abstract**

Innovation and research have been key features throughout the sixty years the UK has publicly funded a National Health Service. Over the last thirty years, in planning health service reforms, successive Governments have drawn on the values of the private sector, where innovation is considered an imperative if firms are to survive in the global market place. Consequently, the innovation imperative is now at the heart of UK health policy.

Traditionally innovation is regarded as a technical rational endeavour resulting from research and development activity. In order to examine the assumptions underpinning this orthodox view, this study takes a critical perspective. A view from the world of policy, captured through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with a cohort of eleven policymakers using the *Framework* method is complemented with an inductive examination of two innovations in health care, using case study methodology in which twenty-six participants were interviewed in some depth. Analysis of interviews with policymakers highlighted the contested nature of the concept of innovation, the range of, sometimes competing, stakeholder perspectives regarding the legitimacy of an innovation and the tensions and paradoxes in the system. Both cases examined sought to identify and address the health care needs of groups of people who do not routinely access mainstream health services. They were compared and contrasted by drawing on Lukes' conceptual analysis of the concept of power, and served to illustrate the complexity of the innovation process, the multiplicity of stakeholders involved and the potential of competing agendas to stifle innovation.

This study demonstrates how political processes at an individual, organisational and national level have the capacity to impact on the potential of innovations in health care to flourish. It offers a range of factors that policymakers and practitioners may wish to consider when seeking to foster innovation in health care.