

## The Editor's Perspective

A FEW YEARS AGO the historian David Lowenthal wrote a book titled *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. Nowhere, perhaps, is the foreignness of the past more evident than in the history of health care. Today, most of us regularly take at least one medication prescribed by our doctor. Many of us take for granted the health insurance that comes with our jobs even as we argue over whether and how to extend that coverage to the millions of uninsured Americans. Health care is a major public expense, a prominent feature of public policy, and a highly controversial issue in political debate. And a giant institutionalized system of health care supported by the American Medical Association and the major health insurance carriers overshadows a number of "alternative" or complementary health care treatments that citizens regularly employ. In all of these ways and many more, the not-so-distant past is indeed foreign territory.

Thus, I am proud to introduce in this issue the first of a major three-part history of medicine in Iowa by University of Iowa medical historian Susan Lawrence. One of the biggest challenges facing a historian of a topic such as this—one closely associated with scientific advancement—is to tell the story in a way that recognizes and conveys the contingency of history. When the current state of affairs on a topic is so familiar, it is all too easy to see its prior history as inevitably leading to the present state and, even more dangerously, to see that development as a record of steady progress.

I am pleased to report, then, that Professor Lawrence resists both temptations. She points to the diverse options available to Iowans in the past and shows how the paths taken were the result of human choices made in particular conditions. I commend to you this first installment in the history of an issue that is critically important to all of us, and urge you to watch for further installments in the next two issues of the *Annals of Iowa*.

—Marvin Bergman, editor

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