

Doctor provides new perspective on medical school

■ **Becoming a Doctor: A Journey of Initiation in Medical School.** Melvin Konner. Elisabeth Sifton Books/Viking. \$19.95.

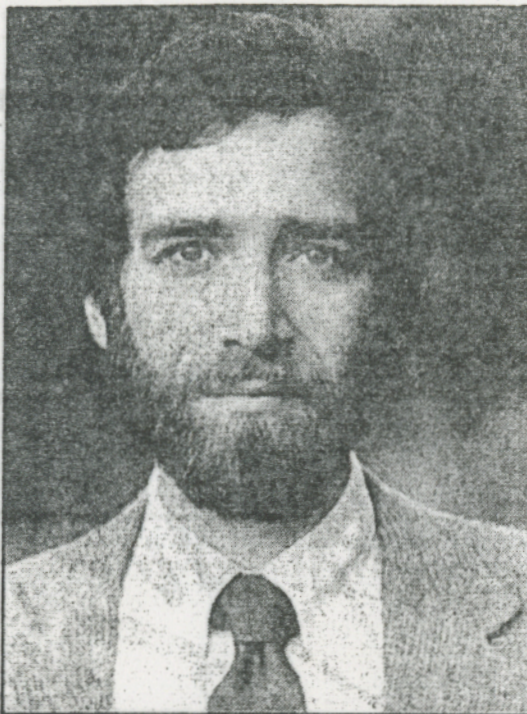
By William C. Conner
Special to The Journal-Constitution

For the many who never attend medical school, and especially for the few who do, there is much to enjoy and to carefully weigh in this well-crafted account of a Harvard professor who, already an established anthropologist in his mid-30s, entered medical school and, as a participant-observer, studied the training process. Although wearing the same traditional hospital whites worn by his fellow students, and enduring the same rigorous training, he pursued a personal goal in collecting sociological data much in the same way he had with the !Kung San (bushmen) tribes of Africa's Kalahari Desert.

This book records his observations, presented to us in case histories and brisk anecdotes, with a wrap-up chapter of conclusions. He focuses on the third year of training, when a student first meets the bruising realities of life on the wards of a teaching hospital. "Too many facts are being taught too thoughtlessly in too short a time," he tells us, and "the models to which students are exposed are largely wrong.

"They are outrageously overworked, sleep-deprived, overburdened with responsibility, bewildered by a barrage of ever-changing facts and oppressed by the medical hierarchy, of which they are on the lowest rungs."

Throughout the book, Konner carries the reader through pain and joy in daily encounters with chaos, disease, death and healing cures. He is at his best in chronicling the need for empathy as well as mechanical virtuosity and pleads eloquently for humanistic training methods in hope of producing doctors who are more than skilled mechanics, lacking in compassion for the human machines they repair. ☛



MELVIN KONNER: An anthropologist's view of life in medical school.

The author, who now teaches anthropology at Emory University, is to be complimented on his honesty and insight. He avoids soap-opera melodrama and reports what he witnessed. Anyone who has made his medical journey will agree that teaching hospitals are crucibles heated by incredible demands of a training system that brutalizes students in the same way the military does new recruits. The end product, the American doctor, gives the best technical care in the world. This the author lauds, but he calls atten-

tion to defects not in technology but in the human aspects of care.

"Why," he asks, "am I then not optimistic?" His answers include the teaching bureaucracy inertia, the fact of previous generations of doctors wanting the next to suffer equally in order to earn membership in the "club," and he also points to patients.

"Change will be slow in coming, if it ever comes, because consumers-patients, all of us, are as conservative as the most staid medical educators. We, too, place the highest value on technical prowess."

The author is sympathetic to but not at peace with doctors. After training, he did not enter the practice of medicine but returned to anthropology.

"Perhaps they have earned the right to arrogance. They certainly feel that they have. But one wonders if they can see the self-serving aspects of their behavior. They are extremely unreflective, criticizing each other relentlessly for any slight delay during which some real thought about what they are doing might take place."

It is regrettable that Konner chose not to practice. The profession needs him in the same way ancient Greece needed Socrates, both to point out the flaws and to be a good example. "They smile at their patients, when they can," he says, "in something like the way flight attendants smile at their passengers." Whatever motivated this remarkable man to endure the ordeal of the training crucible became altered enough that he concludes, "I would not want my daughter or son to be one or to marry one."

I'm sorry he's no longer with us in the medical profession. Nothing in my life has been so marvelous as being a doctor. But I'm glad that he wrote this book. And I dare every member of the American Medical Association to read it. ■

William Charles Conner is a physician in Grayson, Ga., whose short stories have been published in the St. Andrews Review.