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BOOK REVIEWS

A NOT ENTIRELY BENIGN PROCEDURE: FOUR YEARS AS A MEDICAL STUDENT

By Perri Klass. 256 pp. New York, Putnam, 1987. \$18.95.

BECOMING A DOCTOR: A JOURNEY OF INITIATION IN MEDICAL SCHOOL

By Melvin Konner. 390 pp. New York, Viking, 1987. \$19.95.

Here are two more autobiographical accounts of weathering medical school — Harvard Medical School, to be exact. These two student-authors, Klass ('86) and Konner ('85), were in classes only a year apart, and they tell of their experiences in an entertaining way; both are professional writers. Perri Klass has written two previous books; one of them, *I Am Having an Adventure* (New York, Putnam, 1986), is of the same introspective, self-analytic narrative type. In addition, she has written articles for *Mademoiselle*, *The New York Times*, and *Massachusetts Medicine*. Melvin Konner has written in social anthropology, especially on the tribes of the Kalahari Desert in southwestern Africa, to which he often refers. He has also written a sort of physiologic-neurologic-evolutionary book entitled *The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit* (New York, Harper & Row, 1982).

What manner of books are these, that reveal to the general public the "inside story" of medical school or residency years? Are they travel books? Insider-revelation books? Do they contain some hidden agenda for medical-teaching reform? Or are they merely random personal reminiscences of four remarkable years? There are elements of all those genres in these books.

We have reviewed several similar books in these columns before:

LeBaron's *Gentle Vengeance: An account of a first year at medical school* (New York, Merit, 1981); Klein's *Getting Better: A medical student's story* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1981); Fine's *Married to Medicine: An intimate portrait of doctors' wives* (New York: Athenaeum, 1981) (all three reviewed by Moore LB and Moore FD, *N Engl J Med* 1981; 305:706-7) and Hoffman's *Under the Ether Dome: A physician's apprentice at Massachusetts General Hospital* (New York, Scribner, 1986) (reviewed by Stanbury JB, *N Engl J Med* 1987; 317:255-6).

So many of these books deal with Harvard Medical School and its teaching hospitals that one wonders whether the entering class is asked for a show of hands of all those planning to write a story about their medical school years.

Klass' book is an intensely introspective tale of her being admitted to, having a baby during, weathering the four years of, and graduating from the Harvard Medical School and then learning of her future on Match Day in March of her fourth year. While there is little here to help the public interpret or understand the travails of medical education, there are accounts of travails aplenty: it is tough, the hours are long, the challenge to sanity often pressing. The book focuses on the author's reactions: "I'm left more disturbed not by the fact that children die, not by the different diseases from which they die, or the differences in the medical care they receive, but by the way their parents look at me, at my profession. Perhaps it is only in this that I allow myself to take it all personally." It is in this style that the narrative is entirely personalized; the reader is offered no insight into how medical school experiences affect students of different backgrounds and is given little basis for conclusions about medical learning in general.

The book starts with the admission process and the preclinical year, followed by a long section (the bulk of the book) on the clinical years. Here, the chapter titles indicate the spirit of the text: "The First Time," "Camels, Zebras, and Fascinomas," "The Scrubbed and the Unscrubbed," "Baby Talk," "The Prize in the Crackerjack Box." The author also tells us of her trips abroad to learn about medical care in other countries.

People are deftly typecast and thus disposed of: this is the somewhat zoologic aspect of Klass' writing. The interns and residents are painted with a telling brush: "The resident is John McGonagle. He is quite small, thin and wiry, with curly red hair, he almost dances through the hospital, and his ironic nickname amongst the interns and residents is Godzilla." They are all very hard working. "Godzilla" will put in "about 130 hours a week, in a position of tremendous responsibility and earn something over \$24,000 a year." Writers of this type should all be reminded at their first-day briefing in the Common Room that there are only 168 hours in the week, no matter how hard you work. But then, what is writing about the medical school years without a bit of exaggeration?

There are occasional glimpses into the unexpectedly sympathetic side of those arrogant attending physicians (usually medical) or hard-boiled residents (usually surgical), and flashes of wonderful writing, as in her story of a dying baby. "There are no words, really, for the tragedy of this small perfect body without a functioning brain. There are not even the conventional words of sympathy you offer to parents — how lucky you are to have known the child, to have had your lives enriched by the child. What the parents will mourn is the loss of hopes and plans and fond expectations."

The third section of the book, entitled "Issues," has a brief conclusion, "Putting It Together." Although there are some perceptive bits here that I found very appealing, there is a great deal of grievance against the medical school, the medical profession, and the arrangements for the curriculum. (Curiously, neither of these authors makes any mention of the fact that between 1982 and 1986, while they were in the Harvard Medical School, an entirely new, reformed curriculum — the "new pathway" — was in the process of being instituted.)

Klass found some solace in her writing: "The process of writing about medical school has changed the last four years for me. I think that in many ways it has helped me through. . . ." She weathered the same experience as approximately 450,000 other people who live in this country today. While her words offer no perceptive critique

of medical education, they do tell — often in delightful style — of the remarkable change in one's life that is associated with becoming a physician.

Turning now to Konner's book, I must confess that I had several strong biases before I even opened it. There was the initial bias that "We went through all this and didn't make such a fuss about it." Then there was my additional bias against the book's title. The author was already a doctor — a doctor of philosophy in anthropology — and he never did intend to become a physician. When he went through medical school, he was approximately 15 years older than his medical school classmates; right from the start, he planned to write about his experience as he had previously written about the !Kung San, his favorite tribe in the Kalahari. He writes: "The principle that 'nothing human is alien to me' had been embraced by many philosophers. As an anthropologist sleeping in the sand in a grass hut in the Kalahari desert, or sitting around the fire all night talking and singing and laughing with people in one of the most primitive of all human groups, I have lived that principle. I went to medical school partly because I wanted to live it at the bedside as well."

In his preface, Konner states that he doesn't like American medicine. Why "American"? Does he like Canadian medicine? British, French, Scandinavian? Does he know anything about any of them? Or is he talking about the Western medical tradition in general, as compared with primitive tribal medicine? Writing of a sick child: "Still, none of these experiences struck me as a compelling reason to view the practice of medicine as more important than the study of human behavior. That boy should not have been ill to begin with. 'Diseases of the soul' are still paramount."

In the final pages of the book, he returns to his apparently deep distrust of "American medicine" and his admiration for the healing rituals of the !Kung San. In between the author's two assertions of his anthropologically ingrained faith in faith, I found a richly rewarding book about medical education, far better and more worthwhile than others of its kind. Perhaps this is a reflection of the author's seniority, his anthropologic eye, and his experience in writing.

Konner confines his attention entirely to the third year, the major clinical year of the medical school curriculum. We read marvelous accounts of many case histories, the behavior of physicians and residents in looking after their patients, and the challenges that each patient presents to that combination of science and humanism so essential to the practice of medicine. The only sour note concerns the author's unhappiness during his three-month rotation in internal medicine (the longest rotation and the subject of three major chapters). It was during this experience in the overarching "mother of the clinical fields" that Konner encountered the most scornful, conceited, difficult, egotistical, hard-talking, tough-acting residents and staff.

The author tries to maintain the anonymity of the institutions he depicts. When he tells about his applications to medical schools, he names several, but when it comes to his admission to one of them, he is suddenly arch, referring to it as "Galen Medical School." Judging from the specifics of Konner's story, there can be little question that he attended Harvard Medical School and that the major teaching hospital of his experience was the Beth Israel Hospital.

Although not as exhaustively introspective as Klass' book, Konner's touches on the stresses of being a bit older than most other students and having a wife and children whom he rarely sees. Yet at the same time, Konner has the wisdom to realize that his family may give him a kind of support and solace that many of his confreres lack. In a sense, such wisdom is the beauty of this book. The author can write about a shattering experience, a humorous episode, or some brutal, "macho" resident from his own perspective, while at the same time calling our attention to the other side of the story. Thus, Konner lets us see things in the round, in marked contrast to Klass, who offers a flat kaleidoscope of shifting colors.

The most remarkable aspect of Konner's book is its revelation of the strength and depth of the medical curriculum. It is a matter of never-ending wonder that a young person, only two years after

admission, can enter intimately into the lives of so many people — witness and participate in the care of so many human problems. And the medical student is uniquely privileged. The physician is typecast in a certain role as internist, pediatrician, or surgeon, no longer free to wander around the hospital simply to see what is going on — but the student can do just that. Konner sees the unique educational value of this privilege. If I were a member of a curriculum committee, reading this book would leave me hard put to find a good reason for change. What a wealth of riches are in store for medical students in their clinical years.

Thus, although I started out with a strongly negative bias, I am giving this book a rave review. I think it is the finest, and in many ways the most interesting, of all the "I was there" books.

Now we return to our original question: What manner of books are these? And why are they for the general public?

I believe the answer lies in their narrative of the remarkable transition that young physicians undergo. Besides medical school, there is probably no other four-year experience — unless it be four years' service in a war — that can so change the cognitive content of one's mind and the nature of one's relationships with others.

I am quite prepared for the lawyers, the people in business, and the clergy to tell me of their years of professional school, and I will listen willingly. But the detailed study of human anatomy, biochemistry, and physiology and of the pathology of human diseases opens a whole new window, introduces a whole new language, and reveals a whole new set of concepts that are then applied directly to those with whom the physician shares this planet. Medical students suddenly find that they live in a wholly new relation to their fellow humans. They are thrust into this relation before they are even aware of it. It is a relationship of closeness, of intimacy, of trust; of violating social boundaries with questions about sex life and drug habits; of violating physical boundaries with examinations of the most intimate type, yet doing so with the patient's consent. In what other field of human activity is one exposed to a mixture of science and humanism so spectacular, so totally new, that it effects a radical change in one's life?

In all books of this type, there is an abundance of anti-medical-establishment sentiment. They all allude to the dehumanization of medical practice. But in both the books reviewed here — especially Konner's — it is clear that there are parts of medicine that must be dehumanized, at least in the narrow sense, to be effective. Sitting down to stare at a set of hemorrhoids that protrude from the anus of an otherwise fine and presentable person is naturally a journey into something that is less than educational, cultural, or "humanizing." But the hemorrhoids hurt. They bleed. They must be treated. That's your job. Maybe there's a cancer up there. Killing off all the bone marrow in a terribly sick patient by radiation and then trying to sterilize the rest, hoping you can put it back in and make it work, is surely the essence of brutality. The demonic, dehumanizing aspect of medicine is at the heart of the intrinsic enigma of caring and curing. There must be both, and sometimes the curing can be tough. Konner clearly appreciates this.

Konner writes that the medical service for which he worked adhered to the maxim "never call a surgeon" and rarely, if ever, called a psychiatrist. But it will be clear to any clinician that some of the patients described in Konner's book were needlessly subjected to painful reinsertions of intravenous infusions when the insertion of an indwelling subclavian line with an anticoagulant cap (a procedure often done by surgeons) would have spared them that pain, and that the patient with severe emotional and gastrointestinal symptoms needed not only medicine and surgery but also in-depth understanding (something often provided by psychiatrists).

To learn caring and curing together, to learn how they are essential to each other, to avoid petty "turf prejudice" in order to serve the patient best, to learn how science and humanism interact — these are the touchstones of medical education. That message, although never stated in so many words, comes through loud and clear in Konner's book. Some of the grueling challenges must be told: the virtual impossibility of joining science and humanism in approaching the terminal, brain-dead patient, an out-cast with no family; and of writing "no code," or "DNR." Experiences such as these teach some of the most bitter (and most

important) lessons of a clinical curriculum. Konner describes them deftly and convincingly.

Both books ignore nurses and their work. Yet if these two authors were startled as they plunged into the realities of life and death, blood and guts, pain and pus, imagine what the experience must be like for nurses. These young women (and only a few men) enter their profession with less advanced education, less clinical privilege, less economic security, and less ego support than most medical students — and certainly when they are about two to four years younger. Yet, within a year or two they find themselves plunging into the same whirlpool. Working with nurses of absolutely remarkable competence and insight has formed some of the most moving experiences of my own surgical career. Physicians know little about nursing education and often show little concern for the human values of these colleagues. Both of these books fall short of portraying the total human ecology of the medical profession through their total failure to acknowledge the important role of nurses.

A medical student meets thousands of people: a large faculty of about 50 to 150 members in the preclinical years, a huge clinical faculty of about 100 to 500, as well as nurses, interns, residents, administrators, and other students. In addition to all these persons, he meets hundreds of patients and their family members, many of whom he knows by name; in some cases he knows more details of their personal and intimate lives than do their closest friends. This dramatic expansion of the student's human contact is one of the remarkable features of the medical school experience. Although both these books bear eloquent witness to that bewildering introduction to the human race, the two authors sometimes seem unduly intolerant of people, especially their elders and teachers.

Even though my physician's bias has been negative toward the spite of "I was there" books about medical school, each has a story to tell — a story that the public seems anxious to hear. Klass' book is quite entertaining, and every medical student would gain insight by reading Konner's remarkable book. Though the latter chronicles the sometimes atypical experience of an atypical medical student who never intended to become a practicing physician, it tells a story that every curriculum committee should study and that every medical student will enjoy.

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NOTICES

Notices submitted for publication should contain a mailing address and phone number of a contact person or department. We regret we are unable to publish all Notices received.

MEDICAL UPDATE — 1988

The course for primary care physicians will be offered in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., March 7–11.

Contact CME, Univ. of Minnesota, Box 202 UMHC, 420 Delaware St., SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455; or call (612) 626-5525.

CHANGING TIMES IN OB-GYN

The course will be offered in Incline Village, Nev., Jan. 31–Feb. 4.

Contact Nina Musselman, Office of CME, UC Davis, School of Med., 2701 Stockton Blvd., Sacramento, CA 95817; or call (916) 453-5390.

EPILEPSY FOUNDATION OF AMERICA

The following awards are available: Research Grants (deadline Sept. 1); Clinical Research Fellowships (deadline Sept. 1); Postdoctoral Fellowships in the Behavioral Sciences (deadline Sept. 1); Behavioral Sciences Student Fellowships (deadline March 1); Medical Student Fellowships (deadline March 1); International Clinical Research Fellowship (deadline Sept. 1); and International Visiting Professorships (deadline Sept. 1, 1989).

Contact Epilepsy Fdn. of America, 4351 Garden City Dr., Landover, MD 20785; or call (301) 459-3700.

11TH ANNUAL MID-WINTER SYMPOSIUM IN OB/GYN

The symposium will take place in Scottsdale, Ariz., March 2–4.
Contact The Secretary, Phoenix OB/GYN Soc., 3412 N. 4th Ave., Phoenix, AZ 85013; or call (602) 241-1917.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO

A course entitled "8th Annual Current Approaches to Radiation Oncology, Biology and Physics" will be offered in San Francisco, March 9–11.
Contact The Crest Organization, 940 Emmett Ave., #14 Belmont, CA 94002; or call (800) 222-8882 (natl.), or (415) 595-2704 (Calif.).

PROBLEMS IN RHEUMATOLOGY

The course will be offered in St. Petersburg Beach, Fla., March 16–19.
Contact Dr. Bernard F. Germain, Univ. of South Florida Coll. of Med., Div. of Rheumatology, 12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Box 19, Tampa, FL 33612; or call (813) 974-2681.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The following courses will be offered: "New Techniques in ENT and Facial Plastic Surgery" (Vail, Colo., March 13–19); "Early Intervention in Acute Myocardial Infarction" (Matteson, Ill., March 16); and "Advances in Autologous Bone Marrow Transplant" (Oakbrook, Ill., March 19).
Contact Univ. of Chicago, Ctr. for CME, 5841 Maryland Ave., Box 139, Chicago, IL 60637; or call (312) 702-1056.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF OTOLARYNGIC ALLERGY

The following programs will be offered: "Intermediate Course in Otolaryngic Allergy and Immunology" (San Francisco, Feb. 23–28); "Basic Course in Otolaryngic Allergy" (Albuquerque, N.M., May 17–22); and "American Academy of Otolaryngic Allergy Annual Meeting" (Washington, D.C., Sept. 29–Oct. 1).
Contact American Acad. of Otolaryngic Allergy, 1101 Vermont Ave., NW, Suite 303, Washington, DC 20005; or call (202) 682-0456.

HEAD AND NECK ANATOMY

The Athon D. Brashear Postgraduate Course will be offered in Richmond, Va., March 7–10.

Contact Dr. Hugo R. Seibel, Dept. of Anatomy, Box 709, Medical Coll. of Virginia, Richmond, VA 23298; or call (804) 786-9624.

JOHNS HOPKINS MEDICAL INSTITUTIONS

The following programs will be offered: "Symposium on Dysphagia" (March 10 and 11); "Spectrum of Developmental Disabilities X: Issues of Early Intervention" (March 14–16); and "Imaging Living Brain Chemistry: Principles and Practice" (March 17 and 18).

Contact Jeanne Ryan, Office of Cont. Educ., 720 Rutland Ave., Turner 22, Baltimore, MD 21205; or call (301) 955-6046.

EASTERN VIRGINIA MEDICAL SCHOOL

The following conferences will be held: "Legal Medicine Seminar" (Norfolk, Va., March 11); "4th Annual Symposium on Geriatric Medicine" (Williamsburg, Va., April 8 and 9); "Clinical Electrocardiography: Basic Concepts and Interpretation" (Washington, D.C.–Crystal City, April 20–23); "8th Review of Practical Dermatology for the Primary Care Physician" (Lake Buena Vista, Fla., May 5–8); and "4th EVMS Family Medicine Review Course" (Virginia Beach, Va., June 13–17).

Contact Eastern Virginia Medical School, P.O. Box 1980, Norfolk, VA 23501; or call (804) 446-5243.

ADVANCES IN PEDIATRICS I

The course will be offered in Scottsdale, Ariz., March 4–6.

Contact CME Registration, Dept. of Educ., American Acad. of Pediatrics, P.O. Box 927, Elk Grove Village, IL 60009; or call (800) 433-9016, ext. 7657 (natl.), or (800) 421-0589 (Ill.), or (312) 228-5005 (intl.).