

### Becoming a Doctor

**Becoming a Doctor: A Journey of Initiation in Medical School**, by Melvin Konner, 390 pp, paper \$7.95, New York, NY, Penguin Books, 1988.

*Becoming a Doctor: A Journey of Initiation in Medical School*, by Melvin Konner, MD, is, in a word, outstanding. It was written about an experience that takes place at the "wrong time" in Konner's life, through the senses of a 33-year-old anthropologist, learned educator-author, husband, and father. His "mistake," however, provides readers with an unparalleled, mature, and in-depth review of 4 years of the travail of medical school.

While a beginning chapter is devoted to the preclinical years, "the series of endless lectures and laboratory exercises—the knowledge assembly line," and an ending chapter to year 4, a time for "consolidation, exploration, thought, and coasting," the majority of the book focuses on year 3 clinical rotations.

Although the author describes physicians as neither scientists nor artists but artisans-craftspeople of the highest order, he artistically paints procedures, conditions, and anatomy-physiology with beautiful descriptive phrases. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation becomes "squeezing death out of the chest seventy times a minute," a patient with Parkinson's disease is "an alert mind gradually trapped in a cage made up of his face and body," and a woman's labor "like an earthquake inside her body." The book is richly endowed with such metaphors and numerous aphorisms.

We are guests meeting the patients he encounters that year, witnessing the pain and suffering of disease and death as well as the joy of healing and exuberance of new life. We become his companion, partner and alter ego as we once again experience the anxiety of new (and sometimes provocative) clinical situations, the fumbings of a novice learning psychomotor skills, and the fatigue of being responsibly on-call.

Besides wondering about life's mysteries, readers are privy to thoughts and feelings of the author regarding "teachers" of medicine. He is painfully

honest and descriptively critical of many of the house staff and attending faculty he encounters. The accounts of raucous humor, arrogant ignorance, and pedantic pedagogy are frightfully frequent. Similarly, as we hear the insults and mistreatment not only of the student-writer but of patients (directly and indirectly), we can feel the roots of bitterness and cynicism growing deeper into physicians' humanity. There were, albeit fewer, faculty, house, and nursing staff who were able to express simple human decency, compassion, and clinical competence, but only twice during the schooling was true sympathy and pity observed in physician-teachers.

*Becoming a Doctor* is a rare blend of philosophy, theology, humor, and education. It provides an occasional brief historical perspective on medical practices and a plethora of clinical pearls. Specialty personalities are wittily characterized and house officer slang tactfully interjected and clearly defined. One minor distraction was the purposeful explanation of medical terminology intended perhaps to encourage marketing to a wider audience.

Besides the cognitive aspects of medical education, notions regarding the adoption of physicians' values, opinions of those "at the top," and attitudes concerning patients, practice, and the profession are elucidated. Thoughtful, probing, and sensitive questions are asked, ethical principles tested, and moral-spiritual meanings weighed. The book can be viewed as an indictment of the American medical education system through numerous examples of inappropriate, insensitive, and maladaptive behaviors, as well as an approbation of the same for the "best medical care in the world." The author writes, "I defended . . . the doctors. They may have been guilty of an imperfect science, but they were on the frontline, eye to eye with . . . patients."

As a physician, reading *Becoming a Doctor* was an enthralling and cathartic experience. The names and locations were different, but the problems and attitudes were synonymous with a mid-western training. Medical students, physicians in training, "local medical doctors," and academic physicians can identify with most of Konner's journey.

He does not offer any easy answers or pat solutions to problems he encountered. Although his attitude for change is not particularly optimistic, some of the 1984 GPEP (General Professional Education of the Physician) recommendations are scheduled to be addressed by a revision of the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) in 1991—screening for students who are able to think creatively, express themselves originally and clearly, and address human problems and emotional and ethical dimensions of care in a more humane manner. Konner is a truly gifted writer whose talents if not used in patient care are also needed in medical education.

By the way, Dr Konner, "A.M.F." can also mean "adios, my friend."

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