

Realistic, brutal memories

Becoming a Doctor

A Journey of Initiation in Medical School. By Melvin Konner. Viking. \$19.95.

By Ashley Montagu

Melvin Konner was a respected anthropologist who taught at Harvard, did two years of field work among the Bushmen of the Kalahari, and is married to another very able anthropologist (they have a daughter and a son). In the middle of his fourth decade, Konner decided to fulfill a long-felt desire to become a doctor.

At age 34 he applied for admission to 18 medical schools and was accepted by almost all of them. The present volume is a memoir of the four years he spent learning to be an M.D. at one of the most prestigious of them: the Harvard

Medical School.

Having spent some 20 years teaching in medical school and having read many works on medical schools and medical education, I have no hesitation in saying that this is probably the best account ever written on what goes on in those institutions and why the practice of medicine has become a disaster.

Konner is sensitive and compassionate, always a help to an anthropologist. He is also highly competent in his grasp and practice of the behavioral sciences. He is widely read and cultivated.

Excellent writer that he is, Konner makes us relive along with him the life of a student in the pressure cooker of the dramatic and brutalizing environment of the clinical years at a hospital. There cannot be anywhere—at least not in the United States—a doctor who will not relive again the experiences in which Konner so realistically involves the reader.

Let it be said at once that while he is highly critical, Konner is not

the kind of critic who walks down the field after the battle and shoots the wounded. On the contrary, he writes with love and respect for the medical profession. His teachers, administrators, bureaucrats and fellow students are all, he fully recognizes, victims of a system of training—it can hardly be called education.

This system seems designed to turn the student into a memorization machine, overloaded with a cascade of events, admonitions, techniques and skills, often humiliated and derogated by teachers who made it clear that in the hospital setting, the lowest rung on the ladder of authority was occupied by the patient. Ignoring the patient, indeed, is the norm. With the exception of the nurses, everyone made jokes about the patients, who were often treated with undisguised contempt or indifference, and were frequently referred to by their diseases rather than by their names. Obscenities and obscene jokes are so frequent as to be almost the rule.

of medical school

Most of Konner's teachers seem to have been ill-educated—trained in technics and skills and instrumentation—and rather narrow people. Their seminars and lectures were usually rigid, authoritarian and intolerant of ambiguities. It is doubtful any could accurately describe the meaning of the word "cause," for what they were mostly interested in was the search for certainties, in the course of which they could hardly have been able to distinguish between "necessary" and "sufficient" conditions.

The poor medical student is constantly required to perform herculean feats of memorization, while being overburdened with duties, suffering from sleeplessness, lack of exercise and poor diet. Stress is the mode of learning. There is hardly any time to think and no encouragement to feel.

It is not surprising that, like Konner, the student will fall into a chronic state of physical and mental derangement. And this is considered good for the student—a rite of passage through which he

must pass. In his final chapter, Konner offers a truly shocking analysis of the deliberate dehumanization of the student who is to become a doctor.

Having decided against practicing medicine, Konner now teaches anthropology at Emory University in Atlanta, where he is affiliated with the psychiatry department.

Becoming a Doctor, in addition to reading like an exciting novel, is in my opinion the most important book on medical education in almost 80 years—since Abraham Flexner's famous report of 1910, *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*.

Ashley Montagu is a distinguished anthropologist and author.

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