

BOOK REVIEW

MY FRIENDS THE DOCTORS

By Sigmund L. Wilens, M.D., 245 pp., Atheneum, New York, 1961.

Well-written and humorous, this book makes easy reading but what makes it worthwhile reading is probably the fact that there are so few books of its kind.

The author is a senior pathologist who was provoked into print by a TV drama in which a young clinical pathologist showed up the deficiencies of the older school of morphological pathologists. His professed intention is to inform the general public about the nature and usefulness of pathology and, in particular, of autopsy pathology; by his own confession and perhaps of necessity, he digresses quite a bit—slashing (with apologies) at his friends the surgeons, doing likewise (emphatically without apologies) to hospital residents—all with a crusty cynical humor enlivened by such titbits of information as advice to would-be murderers.

This half-in-fun-whole-in-earnest approach is probably justified; it would be difficult to induce anyone to read the central theme unadorned. Autopsies are not drawing-room conversation and Dr. Wilens suspects even that some of the opprobrium formerly attached to grave-robbing anatomists colors the attitude of the public to autopsies; more certainly, the aura of suspicion which often surrounds the compulsory autopsies of coroner procedure mitigates against obtaining permission for autopsy in ordinary circumstances. Dr. Wilens regards most of the reasons usually advanced to relatives when permission is being solicited as specious and, if the relatives were in any state to remember them, unlikely to make for good public relations. As a preliminary to better informing the general public, he conducts a considerable reappraisal of the role of the autopsy in current hospital practice. In this he makes no dramatic discoveries but does set down a lot of things in print for the first time and raises questions which must concern everyone who studies, practices or teaches medicine.

A chapter on, "Our Friends the Journalists, No Enemies Needed", ensures that his book will not become another TV script or be serialized as an exposé of the profession in a national weekly. Two chapters on his own career as a patient include seven major operations, emergency admission to Bellevue for a haemorrhage and a stay in a sanatorium, concerning all of which he writes with the authority of one who has had "every conceivable instrument inserted into every conceivable orifice" by maestros and by others and in no case does he refrain from comment.

It is a useful and enjoyable book; criticism is to some extent forestalled by an Addendum which gives the views of his colleagues (by no means unanimously favourable) on the manuscript. He did not show the manuscript to the residents but, with this possible exception, it appears that Dr. Wilens still has lots of friends among the doctors.

—W.A.T.