

# WHY MEDICINE?

"Why do people go into Medicine?", was a topic raised at a recent panel discussion. One eminent physician strongly voiced the answer, "To play God!" The other panelists did not disagree, and one or two faint cries of protest went unheard or were lost in the rhetorical shuffle. Most felt they should offer something against this purely egocentric philosophy, but some instant soul-searching failed to dredge up any firm basis for rebuttal. In the informal discussion which followed, opinions varied from those of people who agreed whole-heartedly to those of people with stronger super-ego development who only half agreed.

Sentiment is no longer in vogue. The sun seems to be setting on the values of Schweitzer, Dooley, and Hemingway. Our generation admires more the individual who knows what he wants from life and takes it: John F. Kennedy, the Beatles, Lady Bird Johnson. The themes of our novels and plays are not "Love conquers all," but rather "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn." <sup>1</sup> We are not now disappointed when a movie ends unhappily; when love and compassion bring the hero or heroine to destruction. We nod our heads knowingly and say "Look what happens when you let sentiment get the better of you."

Our idol in Medical School is no longer the kindly, old, hardworking General Practitioner, but the sharp, young Specialist who can distinguish twelve different heart-sounds, and who knows every sign and symptom of every syndrome from Addison's to Zollinger-Ellison. Our concept of the physician as a Healer is well described in Nietzsche's words on the "master-morality":

"The noble type of man regards himself as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of; he passes the judgement: 'What is injurious to me is injurious in itself'; he knows that it is he himself only who confers honour on things; he is a creator of values. He is self glorification. In the foreground there is the feeling of plenitude, of power, which seeks to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of a wealth which would fain give and bestow: — the noble man also helps the unfortunate but not — or scarcely — out of pity, but rather from an impulse generated by the superabundance of power." <sup>2</sup>

Medicine, the Art of Healing, has always been closely linked in men's minds with religion and the supernatural, and just as religion has, in the last two centuries, lost much of its tremendous sway over men's thinking, so is Medicine, with the enlightenment of the masses by radio, television, newspapers, and Reader's Digest, losing its cloak of Omniscience and Omnipotence which has always inspired mystic awe in the laity. In spite of this, however, one week of preceptorship and house-calls with a general practitioner soon makes it clear to any of us that the Physician is still the Doctor Almighty in most of his patients' eyes.

When asked the worn question, "Why did you take Medicine?", we answer: "I don't know"; "I like the feeling of power it will give me"; "I can be my own boss"; "I like the money"; "I feel it will never become boring"; "I want to feel useful"; "I crave the social prestige and position"; "I want people to respect me"; but NEVER; "I have a feeling of sympathy for people who suffer and are dying, and it is reward in itself to help a sick person be made well again."

Most of us, from time to time, nostalgically wish this were our number one reason for becoming physicians, but we just accept that it is not and forget about it. We are the victims of this neo-sentimental philosophy of our generation. <sup>3</sup> If one of our group decided to go to Africa, Borneo or Brazil to practise Medicine among the natives for most of the rest of his short life, we should find ourselves thinking, "What is he trying to prove anyhow?"; or "I wonder what he feels guilty about?" There is no room for altruism in our credos.

But where does a man go to search for humility and compassion; for playing God

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is only commendable in the physician who tempers his Godhood with empathy and understanding. There are certainly no courses in these particular humanities offered at Dalhousie.

The question is not really of much importance anyhow; soon we shall all be too busy saving lives, stamping out disease, and making money to think about such basic nonsense.

Editor

1. Camus, Albert – The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays; translated by Justin O'Brien: Random House: New York: 1955.
2. Nietzsche, Friedrich – Beyond Good and Evil; Macmillan and Co., New York; 1924.
3. Newman, D. and R. Benton – The New Sentimentality, Esquire; July, 1964.

### EDITOR'S MESSAGE:

The most interesting and readable part of any journal should be the section, "Letters to the Editor". If you have any strong agreements, disagreements, or opinions, by all means, WRITE US!! We will publish ALL letters, signed or unsigned, complimentary or derogatory, from anyone, anywhere.

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Your letters are the only indication to us that our efforts are being read. We hope they are, and we earnestly want to know your reactions –

So take ten minutes and WRITE to:

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