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Louis Lasagna, Life, Death, and the Doctor

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LIFE, DEATH, AND THE DOCTOR. Louis Lasagna, M.D., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1968. Pp. 321. \$6.95.

We live in an age of criticism, a time when no group has escaped analysis and attack from the journalistic critic. This practice has proven profitable to the critic in terms of economic rewards obtained through the publication and sale of books and articles revealing the weaknesses or misconduct of a professional group. The physician, along with the lawyer, educator and clergyman, has recently been a favorite target of these critics. The physician who deals with individual patients, government and community health agencies, is particularly open to attack from every possible source.

The author of *Life, Death, and the Doctor*, is himself a physician. Dr. Louis Lasagna is outspoken and direct in his critical analysis of his own profession. The reader must determine for himself whether the author's criticism is justifiable. The author makes a direct hit from the very beginning of the book by his use of the emotion-packed words, "Life and Death." In this manner he forever links the doctor with the vital issues which these words "conjure up" and which are among the basic concerns of all people.

In Part I of his book, Dr. Lasagna deals with the doctor's training and the challenge of his new responsibilities. The author is critical of physicians who fall into a "comfortable rut" and do not keep pace with advances in medicine. A valid criticism, it is true, but such a censure would be equally applicable to a lawyer, educator or any citizen who is also in a "comfortable rut." It is, of course, a more serious criticism when applied to the medical person since, as Dr. Lasagna has established, he deals with the basic concerns of life and death. But is this fair to the many dedicated doctors who do keep up with the advances in medicine and thereby take better care of their patients?

Dr. Lasagna reveals the high cost of medical education and shows how this works to the public's disadvantage. He points to this factor as an explanation of why the majority of medical students come from the upper range of the socio-economic scale. He emphasizes the hard work and long hours that face the new doctor, but also stresses the rewards of the profession; particularly the prestige the doctor holds in the community and the high income he commands.

Dr. Lasagna also touches on many aspects of professional conduct and the monitoring of the performance of the medical profession. He discusses attempts to maintain medical standards in the area of licensing

and the lack of uniformity in licensing from one part of the country to another.

In Part II, Dr. Lasagna touches upon the vital issues of life and death, the universal problems and fears of today's insecure, problem-filled world. Here he emphasizes the conservative attitude of doctors who often take a passive and, at times obstructive, rather than an active and aggressive role in medical progress.

Also in Part II of his book, the author discusses the population explosion, world food needs, birth control, sex, fear of pregnancy, methods of contraception, abortion, severe mental retardation, senescence and euthanasia. He also discusses control of heredity, aging processes and preparing for death. In all matters of life and death, Dr. Lasagna points out the importance of effective leadership on the part of the physician.

The author places a great deal of responsibility for progress upon the doctor and includes within this area of responsibility health hazards from the environment. Thus, Dr. Lasagna, in addressing himself to the problem of air pollution, indicates :

There is need for research on animals on the mechanism of harm from atmospheric pollutants. There is need for careful epidemiological surveys to correlate atmospheric pollution and the occurrence of various specific diseases in communities. There is need for the elaboration of realistic standards for clean air. There is probably an important need to study multiple factors, since environmental pollutants almost certainly act in concert with smoking habits, previous cardiorespiratory disease, viruses, bacterial infections, and so on. Most pertinently, the profession must take the lead in educating the public about the hazards and in pushing for realistic controls.¹

In the third part of his book, Dr. Lasagna deals with "The Interface Between Medicine and The Law." This includes the patient-doctor contract, the Good Samaritan controversy, informed consent, professional confidences, court testimony and legal restraints on patients afflicted with insanity.

The last chapter analyzes the complex moral, penal and medical issues involved in drug abuse. This section would be of particular interest for the law student and attorney. Dr. Lasagna, a professor of pharmacology, documents the history of drug abuse and the attitude of the public toward this problem. The author touches on the difficulties in reconciling the philosophy of the law with that of the science of medicine.

1. L. LASAGNA, *LIFE, DEATH, AND THE DOCTOR* 99 (1968).

Dr. Lasagna feels he is justified in preparing his book because the problems of health are of universal importance to both the medical profession and society. This justification is advanced even though the problems he relates are neither new nor concealed; they have been debated time and time again on the premise that by continuing debate and reappraisal, progress will be made and solutions found that have eluded both the medical profession and society up to this time. He indicates that a book of this sort is best written by a physician since the physician is a member both of his profession and of society. Such a book, therefore, according to its author, provides a unique opportunity to attack the problems facing the physician and layman alike. He emphasizes that the book is not intended to be anti-doctor since, as he puts it, "[t]here have been enough of those written of late to last us for the next decade."²

The book is informative, gently critical, but not obnoxious to anyone dedicated to serving humanity professionally. The book provides a focus rather than a solution and introduces the reader to the several facets of a given medical-legal situation without coming to any specific conclusion.

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2. *Id.* at Foreword.

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