

Book Reviews

Claims Examined

Profession of Medicine. A Study of the Sociology of Applied Knowledge. ELIOT FREIDSON. Dodd, Mead, New York, 1970. xxii, 410 pp. \$12.50.

The human investigator of foxes, pythons, or other nonhuman creatures need not bother with what they have said of themselves or what they will think of what he will say of them. Even the first ethnologist to go out to a remote unlettered people need not take much thought of who they think they are; he will of course when he gets there find that they lay claim to some sort of origin, present identity, and even a mission in relation to other peoples. But he can describe it all quite freely. It will be quite a while before his subjects will learn what he has said, and at least a few years before one of his ethnological colleagues will get around to a visit which might result in contradiction before the company of colleagues.

Not so with him who dares describe some group of people in his own society, especially if the group be one of great power and prestige, and if it be highly articulate. For such a group will have made claims to support its place in society. What clearly defined category of people has stated its claim more strongly and publicly than the profession of medicine? The clergy? The law men? Perhaps in some times and places, but clearly the members of the licensed profession of medicine are the champions just now. Freidson dares describe in some detail their claims, their organizations, their activities. The very description is a sort of questioning, as is any free description of something of which there is already an official account. But Freidson goes further in his questioning and makes proposals for changes, for reform, not so much for change of heart as for changes in the structure and organization of medical practice. The emphasis is on the manner of distributing medical care to the population—the total population.

A profession *professes*—to know more about some matter than do other

people, to be able to do something so much better than anyone else that the members should be given a monopoly over doing it; that they are so devoted to giving good service that the taker must trust them and leave to them the right to discipline any of their number who seem to fail to warrant such trust. The public must leave to the profession not only judgment of the expertise and the ethicality (Freidson's word, not mine) of all who practice it with approved license; they must also allow the profession to set the financial and other terms of the practice. Indeed, laymen are to accept the profession's definition of what ails them; only the medical profession can discover and describe new diseases from which it is legitimate to suffer and ask for treatment. This is in effect Freidson's analysis of what a profession is, with the additional point that it must have its claims accepted by society in very large measure. The heart of the claim is that of autonomy.

The profession of medicine has in very recent times become the dominant occupation of a large number of occupations and enterprises that are concerned with health. It has not been long since the midwife performed autonomously her two functions, one of which the medical profession is just now taking on in a "legitimate" way. The bone-setter, herbalist, apothecary, and nurse were likewise autonomous. Now that medicine has become, by use of modern science, much more effective than ever before, it has brought all the auxiliaries—or most of them—under control in a huge system of clinics, hospitals, private offices, schools, and universities. It seeks to gain control over health insurance, government agencies, and other enterprises concerned with distribution of medical care. Freidson deals in detail with the medical division of labor in this huge system. He could have gone further into the enterprises which manufacture drugs and medical equipment, and into the financing of the buildings where physicians carry on their practice.

It is one thing, Freidson more than

implies, for a profession to carry on its work in a small, rather self-contained way, and quite another for it to sit in the seat of autonomous power in one of the largest and most rapidly developing systems in society. He questions whether, in fact, the medical profession does merit its claimed autonomy. Its formal discipline of members is limited to secret handling of complaints by county medical societies and to hounding of "quacks." Informally, doctors whose work is not trusted are frozen out of the referral circles so important in gaining and keeping a practice. He finds that "the profession does not in fact practice forms of regulation which assure the public that care of a uniformly high quality is available to all people irrespective of their economic or social status" (p. 378). He also believes that the profession, by its very autonomy of judgment, deceives itself concerning its practices and its "service" orientation.

He hereby raises the great issue of the health services. At the Third International Conference on Medical Education held in New Delhi a few years ago one heard from medical men from many different countries two refrains. One was that the doctor's first obligation is to his patient (singular); the other was that the mission of the medical profession is to improve the health of the population. Freidson is opting for the second view, and for lay participation in medical decisions and management to implement it.

In preparing his book he has covered an immense amount of work on the history of the medical profession and institutions, and on current research—including his own—by social scientists and medical people. It is the first book that I know of to go to the root of the matter by laying open to view the fundamental nature of the professional claim, and the structure of professional institutions. Whatever one may think of Freidson's proposals for reform of the organization of health activities, the issues he raises cannot be ignored. The professions and professional institutions—they are a more important component of the labor force than ever—must face the same objective analysis, with no holds barred, as must all other aspects of our own and of all other human societies.

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