

Editorials

THE LONGEST ART*

HOW does the general practitioner employ his time? What does he do during his working day? Long ago we thought we knew and we believed that most people who employed us and observed us at our work also knew. That was in the days before the State took almost complete control and before the sociologists and economists took an interest in us. Since then there have been numerous surveys, of single practices, of group practices and of areas; those of the south west of England and south Wales being the most recent. Different facets of our work have been minutely described. Supported as they have to be by many tables and statistics, histograms and figures, reading them is often hard work. The life, the spirit, the soul of general practice is desiccated, even what Francis Brett Young described as "the smell of general practice" is dissipated in these factual reports.

When, as occasionally happens, a family doctor takes up his pen and writes of his experiences in the full life that he has had, we get a very different picture. Such is *The longest art* written by Dr Kenneth Lane. Here is one of those books of reminiscences so difficult to describe in which the long life of a general practitioner—with its joys and disappointments and its secrets—are skilfully portrayed.

Passing over briefly the early problems of the doctor when he first enters general practice, Dr Lane quite properly deals next with the significance of trivial ailments, for until an understanding of the importance of these is achieved no family doctor is fully prepared for his work. As he says "If the doctor fails to look beneath the surface, he will become a very poor general practitioner". A chapter on practice planning shows how the trends in this are going. No one has yet written with more force and greater clarity on the vexed problem of general-practitioner hospital beds. Dr Lane, like all his colleagues who have access to a cottage hospital, has nothing but praise for these institutions and holds that all general practitioners should have charge of hospital beds in which they can treat their patients. The doctor's relationship to his patient and to the family are dealt with in separate chapters, as are his responsibilities in prescribing and issuing certificates. The problem of contraception and abortion are dealt with. The ever-present shadows of negligence and medicolegal troubles are also well covered.

The art of making any book about general practice readable depends in the greater part on the skill of the writer in the employment of the language in which he writes. A lesser but important contribution to the success of any book lies in the method of construction employed. Dr Lane has written a medical history of a family, fictitious in name only, we suspect, whose troubles form a thread which runs through the narrative giving it a true sense of continuity.

If more practitioners put down their personal experiences and described the life histories of those they had under their care, not as clinical phenomena, not as psychiatric cases, but as living people with problems, for it is of these that the art of general practice is made, then many more young doctors would gladly prepare themselves for a life which gives so great a promise of satisfaction.

**The longest art*. KENNETH LANE. London. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1969. Pp. 180. Price 30s. (£1.50).