EDITORIAL

Medicine and the 1970s

MEDICINE ALONG WITH THE NATION and the world is about to enter a new decade. It seems certain that the 1970s will be at least as shattering to tradition as were the 1960s. There is bound to be change and much of it fundamental. Depending upon one's outlook what lies ahead may be viewed with anticipation or foreboding, or perhaps a little of each.

The decade now just closing has seen widespread challenge to and even rejection of many of the traditional attitudes and values which have long been bulwarks of American and indeed Western society. There have been substantial inroads upon long accepted standards of public and private morality as this nation has hitherto understood them. The established order of many churches, the military and even the law has been more or less successfully attacked. The educational system, both public and private, has been exposed as curiously vulnerable to intellectual and physical confrontation and surprisingly ill-fitted for adaptation or change.

Medicine has by no means escaped criticism. The established approach to health care delivery was all but shattered during the 1960s by far-reaching federal legislation. The medical profession was singled out for particular attack and vilification in the press and elsewhere, and at the end of the decade remains a convenient whipping boy. But in spite of all the attacks and public abuse heaped upon the profession, the public opinion polls continue to indicate that physicians and even organized medicine stand very high in the public esteem. Perhaps this in part at least reflects the dramatic achievements of medical science. In any case the thrust of the attack on health care was not so much to tear down as to try to create something better.

The 1970s will surely be different. Some way will be found to end the kinds of disorder and destruction which in the long run cannot be tolerated by any society, especially when those who are tearing things down have nothing to propose. There will be new values which will find acceptance to replace those which are being rejected. There is much to suggest that at least some of these new values will be based upon what is known of human biology, that is, the realities of human nature and human behavior. This will occur as modern society inevitably comes to grips with what must be done to achieve health and well-being for individual citizens and indeed all of the humanity encased in this closed and seemingly shrinking biosphere from which there is no practical escape either now or in the future.

It is entirely possible that the 1970s will mark the beginning of a new cultural recognition of the biologic nature of human society in much the same way that the biologic nature of man himself was finally recognized toward the end of the last century. Medicine, which applies what is known in the human biology of health and disease to promote health, well-being and survival not only of the individual but of the species, should have an important and exciting role to play. Physicians may look to the 1970s with anticipation, certainly not foreboding. We may well be at the threshold of a new era in the history of human society.