

## COP OUT: NOW OR LATER?

By Steven Oboler, Med III

I was arrested last Thursday for blocking the entrance to the San Jose draft board. I have no illusions that the twenty-odd minutes we stood in front of that door will have any effect in shortening the War in Indochina. There was at most only a heart-beat pause in the business-as-usual routine behind that mahogany door. To those who looked at what we did from the comfort of their breakfast table or library desk, it wasn't much, a rite of spring, perhaps.

So why did I do it? I'm not a radical. I'm not particularly impulsive. I'm not dumb. I don't think this was a "Hey-look-at-me" trip. Why then...? I guess basically I'm scared. I'm scared about what becoming a doctor does to people, about what it might do to me. I don't think I'm very different from most of my classmates. I still have some of the idealism that brought me to medical school. Like myself, many of my classmates are dissatisfied with medical care in this country, and tell me they want to something to change it--although they're no more sure about exactly what they'll do than I am. It's this uncertainty that makes us vulnerable. The pressures on a doctor to follow the straight-and-narrow, don't-rock-the-boat path are tremendous. The profession reeks of tradition and the status quo. And one of those traditions is that doctors unquestioningly go into the military. I won't argue here the merits or demerits of military medicine. I would just like to note a frightening phenomenon I see among medical students, interns and residents who are faced with service in the Armed Forces. Many of my classmates say, "Well, when the time comes I just won't go in. I'll refuse. I'll go into the Public Health Service. I'll file as a conscientious objector. I'll go to Canada." By the time internship rolls around most doctors have already made their choice: they cop out. They either try to put off the inevitable by applying to the Berry Program (84% of senior medical students applied in 1969), or hope against hope that the draft will pass them by. The figures speak for themselves: As of April 1970, 96% of all eligible M.D.'s had served in the military (and the Commissioned Corps of the PHS is part, albeit an elite part, of the military). Over the past 15 years, none of the court cases challenging the Selective Service Laws and the various aspects of military service, with the lone exception of the Howard Levy case, have been initiated by or involved doctors.

If all doctors went into the service with a clear conscience about the complicit role they would play in the military and political aspects of the Armed Forces, that is one thing. But it scares the hell out of me that so many doctors go in with guilty consciences, knowing that they will be contributing to a senseless process, but too afraid of the consequences to say, "No, I can't go. I won't go."

And many of these same people say that they want to change the health care system in this country. In my mind there's a credibility gap somewhere in there. The medical system is too big, too old. It's like going into the military. When push comes to shove, most of these people are going to cop out. They may feel a twinge of guilt, just as they did as they went into the military, but they won't be able to actively participate in the changes.

So what does this have to do with standing in front of some obscure draft board? It's a step, a symbol, if you want to call it that. For me it said, "No, this is wrong. I can't go along any more." The War and the Draft are no longer ethereal "over there" or "I'll hassle it tomorrow" issues. The first step is always the hardest, but now I have a "criminal" record. I've been numbered, photographed and finger-printed. Sure, I'm uneasy about it. I wonder what this act will mean in some distant--or not so distant--future. But I could go through my whole life worrying about tomorrow and commit a thousand crimes against humanity for fear of the unknown. God only knows that I'll probably cop out on myself in the future. That's life. I'm only human. But I've said "no" this once, and maybe when push really does come to shove in my life, I'll have had enough practice in saying "no" that I'll follow my conscience rather than give way to my fears.