

COMMENTARY

HEALTH AND FREEDOM. When the National Health Service was introduced in 1948 there were many prophecies of the servitude into which medicine was sure to be sold. Even the gloomiest critics could not have guessed at the ultimate cost of the Service, with hospital beds needing up to £30 a week to be maintained and a vast administrative machine rivalling the Civil Service itself in its bureaucratic complexity. But criticism of method and finance should not overshadow a judgment on what was intended and indeed achieved to remove the crippling fear of illness as a constant threat to the security of the family. That at least has disappeared, and it should not be beyond the wit of men of good will to preserve the Service itself while diminishing its rigidity. The need now is to scrutinize the experience of nine years not only in terms of administrative costs (important though that must be) but in terms of the individual patient's true function. For the patient has a function, passive though it be as he lies helpless in bed or hopeless in the unending queues of the out-patients' department or the doctor's waiting room. Too often the theorists of social medicine seem to envisage the patient as the raw material which the Health Service uses. But patients are persons, not embodiments of disease. They are meant to be free and responsible and medicine is meant to restore them not merely to mobility but to their place as happy and human beings within the society to which they belong. In this issue of BLACKFRIARS three doctors and an anatomist discuss some aspects of this problem: they assert, from their different standpoints, the essential truth that a conviction about man and his nature is the first thing that matters and must provide the criterion by which any system of medicine must be judged.

THE AQUINAS CENTRE. The autumn programme of the Aquinas Centre is now ready and copies may be obtained from the Warden. Of special interest to readers of the journal will be the BLACKFRIARS afternoon to be held on Saturday, December 14.