

The History of the Hippocratic Oath: Outdated, Inauthentic, and Yet Still Relevant

Raphael Hulkower

Albert Einstein College of Medicine
Bronx, New York 10461

ABSTRACT

Nearly all medical schools incorporate some form of professional medical oath into their graduation ceremonies. The oldest and most popular of these oaths is the Hippocratic Oath, composed more than 2,400 years ago. In modern times, especially during the twentieth century, the Hippocratic Oath has had its content changed and its authorship challenged. This article discusses the history of the Hippocratic Oath from its traditional form to its modern adaptations. Additionally, this article seeks to explain the Hippocratic Oath's endurance despite these challenges, based upon the historical importance of Hippocrates and the Hippocratic tradition in Western medicine.

THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF THE "OATH"

Medical school is filled with a variety of ceremonies. There are white-coat ceremonies, stethoscope ceremonies, and cadaver-related convocations. Perhaps the oldest rite of passage is the recitation of the Hippocratic Oath that many medical schools across the globe have incorporated into their graduation ceremonies over the past 500 years (Miles, 2004).

The modern Hippocratic Oath is an oath or declaration taken by many graduating medical students or physicians stating their intentions to practice medicine justly and ethically. Ceremonial and nonobligatory, the Hippocratic Oath can be compared to that taken by a judge, president, or other politician when he or she is sworn into office. Nevertheless, many schools consider it a rite of passage for physicians, and the vast majority of U.S. medical schools incorporate some oath into their graduation ceremonies, about half of which use some version of the Hippocratic Oath (Orr et al., 1997).

What are the origins of this time-honored ritual? What is the history of the Hippocratic Oath? The original Hippocratic Oath is an ancient Greek document simply titled "Oath" and is the oldest and most well known medical oath. Many versions with slight variations exist, and the translation listed on the National Institutes of Health webpage on the Hippocratic Oath can be found at the end of this article. According to Orr et al. (1997), the content of the traditional Hippocratic Oath can be divided into 12 items:

Covenant with deity:

"I swear by Apollo the physician..."

Covenant with teachers:

pledge of collegiality and financial support.

Commitment to students:

promise to teach those who swear the Oath.

Covenant with patients:

pledge to use "ability and judgment."

Appropriate means:

use of standard "dietary" care.

Appropriate ends:

the good of the patient not the physician.

Limits on ends:

originally proscribed abortion and euthanasia.

Limits on means:

originally proscribed surgery for renal stones, by deferring to those more qualified.

Justice:

"avoiding any voluntary act of impropriety or corruption."

Chastity:

originally proscribed sexual contact with patients.

Confidentiality:

not to repeat anything seen or heard.

Accountability:

Prayer that the physician be favored by the gods if the Oath is kept, and punished if it is not kept.

Historians do not know for sure who wrote it. Its exact age is uncertain, but it has been widely accepted that it was composed in the fourth century B.C.E. by the renowned Greek physician Hippocrates, often referred to as the "father of Western medicine." As little is known about the original Oath, it remains unclear what weight it carried in its own time or how widely it was used. In fact, some scholars speculate that there may have been other oaths at that time, of which the Hippocratic Oath is the sole surviving text (Miles, 2004).

The Oath's evolution into modern medical ethics was a slow process. There is little mention of the Oath in

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any capacity for the first 1,500 years after its composition. The Oath was rediscovered in the Middle Ages by church scholars who began modifying or interpreting the Oath to conform to medieval Christian doctrines. The first recorded use of the Oath outside of Greece was at the University of Wittenberg, Germany, in 1508 (Smith, 2008). Finally, in the eighteenth century, the Oath was first translated into English, and medical schools in both Europe and the United States began to use various versions of the Oath in their graduation ceremonies (Miles, 2004; Orr et al., 1997).

The pagan religious content at the opening of the Oath may have been a primary cause in its delayed popularity. Swearing by Apollo and Asclepius probably did not appeal to Western monotheists, even if they agreed with the statements that followed. In fact, the opening line of the Oath is the portion that has seen the greatest degree of transition over the ages. Versions of the Oath that replace Apollo with the Christian God have existed for more than a thousand years, and in recent times more pluralistic versions simply allow one to swear by “whatever I hold sacred” (Daikos, 2007; Miles, 2004).

In addition to the opening proclamation, many institutions have modified the remaining content of the Hippocratic Oath. The most common changes are the removal of the proscription of sexual contact with patients, the ban against using abortive agents, the ban against euthanasia, and the agreement to be accountable for keeping the Oath. While close to 50% of schools have chosen to continue to use the Hippocratic Oath with some modification or modernization substituted to make it more consistent with their own values, other institutions have chosen to administer a different medical oath. Other professional medical oaths being used include the Declaration of Geneva, written in 1948—and revised in 1983—in response to the medical crimes committed during the Nazi regime in Germany, and the oath written in 1964 by Louis Lasagna, academic dean of the School of Medicine at Tufts University. Other schools have composed their own oaths—at times allowing the student body itself to arrange its text, or even instructing each student to write his or her own personal oath (Orr et al., 1997).

Although the twentieth century saw a dramatic increase in medical oaths administered at graduation, the traditional Hippocratic Oath has been subjected to serious criticism and revision. Some argue that its content is outdated, indicated by the many modifications schools have made. Others believe that the Oath fails to incorporate many new ideals that are held dear to medical practice, such as societal or legal responsibilities, research ethics, and accountability in collaborative patient-care models (Loewy, 2007). Finally, the authenticity of the Oath itself was undermined when the research of Ludwig Edelstein (1902-1965), a history of medicine professor at Johns Hopkins University, indicated that the Hippocratic Oath

as we know it may actually be the work of the followers of Pythagoras of Samos, who lived a generation before Hippocrates (Orr et al., 1997).

THE ENDURANCE OF THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH

Despite all of this criticism, the Hippocratic Oath has endured. It remains the most commonly administered medical oath and has retained its original title despite the work of Professor Edelstein. If it is outdated, inappropriate, and historically misnamed, why have most schools not chosen to do away with it? What is it about the Hippocratic Oath that still appeals to the medical community? The answer lies not only in an understanding of the Oath itself, but in an appreciation of who Hippocrates was and what he still stands for.

Hippocrates is still regarded as the father of Western medicine. Despite his modern notoriety, surprisingly little is known about his life. In fact, some historians have gone so far as to state that Hippocrates was not an individual person and that the Hippocratic collection was composed by a group of physicians. Still, many historians believe he was a single man.

Most information about the life of Hippocrates comes from legends circulating after his death. According to his admirers, Hippocrates could trace his ancestry back to Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing, and to Hercules, Zeus’s half-mortal son. Other legends are less complimentary, accusing Hippocrates of burning down the medical library in Cos in order to eliminate competing medical traditions. Yet, both Plato and Aristotle spoke of Hippocrates with great respect and it appears that he was widely praised and renowned even during his own lifetime (Magner, 2005; Bulger, 1973).

The true greatness of Hippocrates emerges not from his biographical information, but rather from his works. Fifty to seventy essays and texts are attributed to Hippocrates, and these documents have become widely accepted as the foundation of Western medicine. These texts contain vast amounts of medical information, but more importantly, they display a new attitude towards the practice of medicine—one that emphasizes nature over philosophy, observation over theory, and the patient over the physician’s self-interest.

Before Hippocrates, Greek philosophers had shown an interest in the study of medicine, but most approaches included some strong shamanistic, religious, or philosophical aspects at the foundation of their understanding of the body and the healing processes. Rarely based upon empirical observations, most of the practice of medicine was based upon an underlying theory or philosophy. For example, Pythagoras of Samos (ca. 530 B.C.E.) believed that pairs of opposites were the first principles of existence. Health was the balance between

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opposites, such as moist and dry, hot and cold, or bitter and sweet. Disease, Pythagoras believed, was caused by an imbalance in one of these pairs of opposites (Magner, 2005).

Hippocrates, however, refused to be bound to any rigid medical dogma or therapeutic system based on philosophy. Medicine should be based upon empirical observations and studies, he argued, not *a priori* systems. Hippocrates believed that the human body was controlled by natural forces, and as such, an astute physician is one who is keenly observant. Hippocrates' case write-ups are known for being detailed observations of medical phenomena, not philosophical treatises. Furthermore, although Hippocrates did subscribe to the doctrine of the Four Humours, he denounced the idea that diagnoses must fit rigidly into this system. For him, the Four Humours—Blood, Phlegm, Black Bile, and Yellow Bile—were a systematic way of explaining how disease is not a localized problem, but rather a disturbance of the entire body (Harrison, 2004; Bulger, 1973).

Hippocrates was also opposed to the idea of practicing medicine based upon religious systems. While he still believed in religion, his entire approach to medical practice was based upon nature. This is most clearly demonstrated in his work on epilepsy, *On the Sacred Disease*. In the ancient world, epilepsy, with its unpredictable seizures, was seen as a disorder beyond the scope of nature—a “sacred disease.” Hippocrates declared that even this “sacred disease” is no more sacred or divine than any other illness. Consequently, Hippocratic physicians regarded the practice of treating epilepsy with purifications and incantations as deceptive practices, both medically improper and sacrilegious (Magner, 2005). Interestingly, Dr. Roger Bulger in *Hippocrates Revisited* notes that Hippocrates' opposition to religion-based medical practice is perhaps one of the clearest indications that the traditional Hippocratic Oath, which begins by swearing to the gods of medicine, is unlikely to have been composed by Hippocrates himself (Bulger, 1973).

Aside from this novel, natural approach to medicine, the Hippocratic writings are also known for the importance placed on practicing patient-oriented medicine. Hippocrates believed that each patient should be treated individually, for his or her own benefit and not the glory of the practicing physician. In one essay, Hippocrates writes, “It is especially necessary in my opinion for one who discusses this art to discuss things familiar to ordinary folk. For, the subject of our inquiry is simply and solely the sufferings of these ordinary folk when they are sick or in pain” (Bulger, 1973). Throughout his writings, Hippocrates emphasizes that physicians should take the least damaging approach to treatment, not the one that will give them the most fame. The humble belief that medicine is a “craft” that a physician practices on behalf of his patients is what

led to the well-known Hippocratic motto: “At least do no harm” (Magner, 2005).

With this history in mind, it becomes quite clear why the Hippocratic Oath has endured. The Hippocratic Oath has endured not because of its specific guidelines and proscriptions but because it represents one's commitment to the Hippocratic tradition—a tradition based upon sound scientific investigation combined with patient-oriented care.

THE TRADITIONAL HIPPOCRATIC OATH, TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL NORTH :

I swear by Apollo the physician, and Asclepius, and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses as my witnesses, that, according to my ability and judgment, I will keep this Oath and this contract:

To hold him who taught me this art equally dear to me as my parents, to be a partner in life with him, and to fulfill his needs when required; to look upon his offspring as equals to my own siblings, and to teach them this art, if they shall wish to learn it, without fee or contract; and that by the set rules, lectures, and every other mode of instruction, I will impart a knowledge of the art to my own sons, and those of my teachers, and to students bound by this contract and having sworn this Oath to the law of medicine, but to no others.

I will use those dietary regimens which will benefit my patients according to my greatest ability and judgment, and I will do no harm or injustice to them.

I will not give a lethal drug to anyone if I am asked, nor will I advise such a plan; and similarly I will not give a woman a pessary to cause an abortion.

In purity and according to divine law will I carry out my life and my art.

I will not use the knife, even upon those suffering from stones, but I will leave this to those who are trained in this craft.

Into whatever homes I go, I will enter them for the benefit of the sick, avoiding any voluntary act of impropriety or corruption, including the seduction of women or men, whether they are free men or slaves.

Whatever I see or hear in the lives of my patients, whether in connection with my professional practice or not, which ought not to be spoken of outside, I will keep secret, as considering all such things to be private.

So long as I maintain this Oath faithfully and without corruption, may it be granted to me to partake of life fully and the practice of my art, gaining the respect of

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all men for all time. However, should I transgress this Oath and violate it, may the opposite be my fate.

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