



The Oath

I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment this oath and this covenant:

To hold the one who has taught me this art as equal to my parents and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art—if they desire to learn it—without fee and covenant; to give a share of precepts and oral instruction and all the other learning to my sons and to the sons of him who has instructed me and to pupils who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to the medical law, but to no one else.

I will apply dietic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from harm and injustice.

I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.

I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work.

Into whatever houses I may enter, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining clear of all voluntary injustice and of other mischief and of sexual deeds upon bodies of females and males, be they free or slave.

Things I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of treatment regarding the life of human beings, things which one should never divulge outside, I will keep to myself holding such things unutterable for "shameful to be spoken".

If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.

THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH

translated by Leon R. Kass, M.D.

This oath, the oldest and best-known expression of a medical ethic, was for centuries regarded as the guide for proper medical conduct. Although the accomplishments of modern medicine appear to have taken the discipline far from its ancient roots, the oath continues to offer a powerful account of what it means to be a doctor.

The oath begins by invoking ancient Greek deities. The specific deities invoked are Apollo, (here, "Apollo Physician"), the god associated with light, truth, and prophecy; Asclepius, child of Apollo, the "father" of medicine; Hygieia (whose name means "health," "living well") and Panacea ("all heal"), both daughters of Asclepius and associated with what modern readers might call "prevention" and "treatment." The oath concludes with a plea, acknowledging that the physician's fortunes depend on his fulfillment of its terms.

The six substantive paragraphs in between address first (in the oath's longest paragraph) how the physician should comport himself with respect to his teachers, as well as his teacher's offspring, his own, and all other students of medicine. Physicians are here, literally, called into fraternity with one another; the gift of the medical art is equated with the gift of life. The five subsequent paragraphs indicate how the physician should conduct himself with respect to his patients and their households. The first three deal with the ends and means of treatment, appropriate and inappropriate, the last two with decorum.

Why begin the oath with an invocation of the gods? Why these gods? What does this beginning suggest about the powers of the physician and their source? Parents, rightly, often resent the authority teachers have over their children. Yet, here, physician-teachers are explicitly equated with fathers, medical students with their sons. Is this equation or analogy justifiable? Why or why not?

What attitude toward the medical arts is expressed in the oath's five paragraphs on ends, means, and conduct toward patients and families?

What, according to the oath, is the true purpose of medicine?

Can you explain and justify the limits the oath places upon the uses of medical technique?

Except to say that a doctor must neither kill nor suggest killing, the oath is silent on the subject of death. What can one infer from the oath about a doctor's obligations to the hopelessly ill?