

## Medical History

### Oaths of Doctors

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All doctors are required to take an oath at the end of medical training. This is a form of unwritten contract between the doctor and the society. The concept of this oath can be dated back to the time of Hippocrates in Greece. But the practice is in vogue even today and this oath is a proud moment in a doctor's life. But there are numerous variations of this oath and it is constantly changing with changing morality and social dynamics.

The history of the oath starts with Hippocrates. But did Hippocrates himself actually pen it down? Scholars debate extensively over the origins of the first medical code of ethics (the oath). It was written probably between fourth and fifth centuries B.C.E. and probably after the death of Hippocrates. Was it the only oath at that time? Again, a question which is impossible to answer. But what is known for sure is the fact that after it was first published, this oath was lost to the scholars for more than a millennium, even in Greece. Then, in 1508, medieval German scholars started using this oath again in the University of Wittenberg. But only when the oath was translated into English two centuries later, that it became widely known and many western medical schools started using it. However, the mention of pagan Greek gods in the first line of this oath may have delayed its acceptance by Christian scholars in Europe. However, although Hippocrates' oath may be forgotten, his works were not. They were translated numerous times and formed the basis of medical education in Europe. Thus, medical scholars often read the text of the oath but they did not adopt it in a ceremonial manner. Medieval documents like Vaticanus Urbinates, Marcianus Venetus and Vaticanus Graecus have full text of the oath. These texts were used not only in Europe but also in the Jewish and Arab worlds. After Wittenberg, probably the University of Jena was the second one to adopt this oath as a ceremony. Later, European schools started reading the oath in Latin.

Were there other medical codes of ethics in the world? Definitely. Wherever medical science developed, the need for a code of ethics was felt. In India, the famed physician Charaka formulated his own code for physicians (described later). In 6th century C.E., the code of Asaph was written in the Hebrew medical texts. This code follows the spirit of the Hippocrates oath. In

the Islamic world, the Hippocratic code was modified to reflect Islamic ideals.

In the Eastern world, Sun Szu-Miao developed a code in 7th century C.E. in China. It is translated as: **On the Absolute Sincerity of Great Physicians**. In Japan also, there was a code: **Seventeen rules of Enjuin**. Thus, all civilizations had independently developed a structure of the medical code of ethics.

It must be remembered that the original Hippocratic Oath is often slightly modified in translation through the ages. If a reader visits different websites for text of this oath, he/she will find slightly nuanced wordings, based on the language skills of the translator. However, the basic principles remain the same. Here, one accepted version of this oath is quoted.

#### Original Hippocratic Oath (Figure 1):



Figure 1: 12th century Greek manuscript of the Hippocratic Oath (the shape of the writing in form of a cross reflects Christian influence)

- I swear by Apollo Physician, by Asclepius, by Hygieia, by Panacea, and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture.

- To hold my teacher in this art equal to my own parents; to make him partner in my livelihood; when he is in need of money to share mine with him; to consider his family as my own brothers, and to teach them this art, if they want to learn it, without fee or indenture; to impart precept, oral instruction, and all other instruction to my own sons, the sons of my teacher, and to indentured pupils who have taken the physician's oath, but to nobody else.

- I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing. Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion. But I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art. I will not use the knife, not even, verily, on sufferers from stone, but I will give place to such as are craftsmen therein.

- Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman, bond or free. And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets.

- Now if I carry out this oath, and break it not, may I gain for ever reputation among all men for my life and for my art; but if I break it and forswear myself, may the opposite befall me.

### Limitations :-

1. Firstly, this oath is taken in the name of Greek gods. But this will not be acceptable to other religions now.

2. This oath forbids abortion. But abortion is legal and acceptable in modern society. Did Hippocrates actually forbid abortion? Or was it a later Christian addition during translations? This is a contentious issue because the medical texts written by Hippocrates contain detailed descriptions of abortion with no mention of the moral aspects.

3. In those times, surgeons were considered separate from physicians. This oath was then meant only for physicians. Hence, they are asked not to touch the knife. But now, all doctors are required to take this oath. So, this part will not be acceptable.

As limitations of this ancient oath became evident, the need for a new document, reflecting modern thinking was felt. In 1964, Louis Lasagna, the dean At Tufts University of USA (Figure 2) wrote a modern version of the medical oath. This is quoted below:

### Modern Oath :

I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.

I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures that are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism.

I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.

I will not be ashamed to say "I know not," nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.

I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know. Most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. If it is given me to save a life, all thanks. But it may also be within my power to take a life; this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play at God.

I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick.

I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.

I will protect the environment which sustains us, in the knowledge that the continuing health of ourselves and our societies is dependent on a healthy planet.

I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm.

If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy life and art, respected while I live and remembered with affection thereafter. May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help.



Figure 2: The Tufts Medical Centre of Boston where the modern medical ethical code was written

Maimonides was a famous Jewish Torah scholar and physician of the Middle ages (Figure 3). He wrote extensively on different legal matters, including the medical code. This is quoted below:



Figure 3: Maimonides Portrait from 1744

### Oath of Maimonides:

The eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. May the love for my art actuate me at all times; may neither avarice nor miserliness, nor thirst for glory or for a great reputation engage my mind; for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children.

May I never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain.

Grant me the strength, time and opportunity always to correct what I have acquired, always to extend its domain; for knowledge is immense and the spirit of man can extend indefinitely to enrich itself daily with new requirements. Today he can discover his errors of yesterday and tomorrow he can obtain a new light on what he thinks himself sure of today.

Oh, God, Thou has appointed me to watch over the life and death of Thy creatures; here am I ready for my vocation and now I turn unto my calling.

As is clear from the text, this oath is heavily influenced by religion and is the prayer of the physician to God. Some medical schools still use this text.

However, after the Second World War, the need for a secular humanistic medical code was felt. This was especially true after the atrocities by Nazi doctors in concentration camps. Thus, the world medical association started making secular codes which can be adopted everywhere. This document is modified periodically to reflect the changes in human thinking and political paradigm shifts. This oath is the most popular one used all over the world and the author of this article also remembers reading this oath at the end of medical training.

### Geneva declaration :

**1949 : The first one**

I SOLEMNLY PLEDGE myself to consecrate my life to the service of humanity.

I WILL GIVE to my teachers the respect and gratitude which is their due;

I WILL PRACTICE my profession with conscience and dignity;

THE HEALTH OF MY PATIENT will be my first consideration;

I WILL RESPECT the secrets which are confided in me;

I WILL MAINTAIN by all the means in my power, the

honor and the noble traditions of the medical profession;  
 MY COLLEAGUES will be my brothers;  
 I WILL NOT PERMIT considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient;  
 I WILL MAINTAIN the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception; even under threat, I will not use my medical knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity.  
 I MAKE THESE PROMISES solemnly, freely and upon my honor.

**2006: the Most modern one**

I SOLEMNLY PLEDGE to consecrate my life to the service of humanity;  
 I WILL GIVE to my teachers the respect and gratitude that is their due;  
 I WILL PRACTISE my profession with conscience and dignity;  
 THE HEALTH OF MY PATIENT will be my first consideration;  
 I WILL RESPECT the secrets that are confided in me, even after the patient has died;  
 I WILL MAINTAIN by all the means in my power, the honour and the noble traditions of the medical profession;  
 MY COLLEAGUES will be my sisters and brothers;  
 I WILL NOT PERMIT considerations of age, disease or disability, creed, ethnic origin, gender, nationality, political affiliation, race, sexual orientation, social standing or any other factor to intervene between my duty and my patient;  
 I WILL MAINTAIN the utmost respect for human life;  
 I WILL NOT USE my medical knowledge to violate human rights and civil liberties, even under threat;  
 I MAKE THESE PROMISES solemnly, freely and upon my honour.

**In 2017, further points were added to this list of codes:**

- I WILL RESPECT the autonomy and dignity of my patient.
- I WILL SHARE my medical knowledge for the benefit of the patient and the advancement of healthcare.
- I WILL ATTEND TO my own health, well-being, and abilities in order to provide care of the highest standard.

Thus, as these serial changes make clear, the code

of ethics is rapidly changing to reflect the complex realities of medical life. For example, health of doctors is now considered an important aspect of the profession. Similarly, civil liberties and autonomy of the patient is also considered vital now.

Recently, in some parts of India, some medical schools have started the "CharakShapath". This is administered in Hindi, one of the 22 constitutional languages of India. The text is given below :

**Charakshapath : (translated from archaic Sanskrit)**

- तू ब्रह्मचारी का जीवन बितायेगा अपने बाल और दाढ़ी बढ़ाएगा केवल सत्य भाषण ही करेगा। मौस नहीं खाएगा आहार में केवल शुद्ध वस्तुएँ ही लेगा ईर्ष्या से मुक्त रहेगा तथा कोई हथियार धारण नहीं करेगा। राजा के प्रति घृणा अथवा किसी अन्य की मृत्यु अथवा कोई भी अधार्मिक कृत्य अथवा विनाश उत्पन्न करने वाले कृत्यों को छोड़ तू सभी अन्य कार्य मेरे आदेश पर ही करेगा।
- तू स्वयं को मेरे प्रति समर्पित कर देगा तथा मुझे अपना स्वामी समझेगा। तू मेरे अधीन रहेगा तथा सदा मेरे कल्याण एवं प्रसन्नता के लिए आचरण करेगा। तू एक पुत्र अथवा दास अथवा आश्रित के रूप में मेरी सेवा करेगा तथा मेरे साथ रहेगा। तू अहंकार-रहित होकर सावधानी और ध्यान से तथा एकाग्र मन विनयस्थायी चिंतन एवं उन्मुक्त आज्ञाकारिता के साथ व्यवहार एवं कार्य करेगा। मेरे आदेश पर या अन्यथा कोई कार्य करते हुए तू अपनी श्रेष्ठतम योग्यताओं के साथ अपने गुरु के हितों की उपलब्धि हेतु ही आचरण करेगा।
- यदि तू धरती पर चिकित्सक के रूप में तथा मृत्यु के पश्चात स्वर्ग में सफलता एवं ख्याति प्राप्त करने का इच्छुक है तो तूझे गऊ एवं ब्राह्मण से लेकर सभी प्राणियों के कल्याण हेतु प्रार्थना करनी होगी।
- तू दिन-रात भले ही कार्य में व्यस्त रहे तू अपने जीवन अथवा अपनी रोज़ी की परवाह किये बिना रोगियों को राहत पहुँचाने का हर संभव प्रयास करेगा। तू विचारों में भी परगमन नहीं करेगा। तू दूसरों की वस्तुओं की ओर आँख उठाकर भी नहीं देखेगा। तू अपनी वेषभूषा एवं जीवन सादा रखेगा। तू शराब का सेवन नहीं करेगा पाप नहीं करेगा और न ही किसी प्रकार पापी की सहायता करेगा।

- तू सदा नम्र, शुद्ध, धार्मिक, प्रीतिकर, समुचित, सच्चे, हतिकर तथा मृदु वचन बोलेगा। तेरा वर्ताव समय एवं स्थान की दृष्टि से उपयुक्त तथा गत अनुभवों से सतर्कतापूर्ण होगा। तू सदा ज्ञान-प्राप्ति के ध्येय हेतु ही कार्य करेगा।
- तू उन व्यक्तियों का इलाज नहीं करेगा जो राजा से घृणा करते हैं अथवा जनिसे राजा तथा प्रजा घृणा करती हो। इसी प्रकार तू उनका भी इलाज नहीं करेगा जिनका चरित्र एवं आचरण अस्वाभाविक, दुष्टतापूर्ण एवं दुःखद हो, जिन्होंने अपने सम्मान को न्यायसंगत न ठहराया हो तथा जो मृत्यु-बन्दि पर पहुँच चुके हैं तथा उस स्त्री का भी उपचार नहीं करेगा जिसकी सेवा-शुश्रूषा करने के लिए उसका पति अथवा कोई संरक्षक मौजूद न हो।
- पति अथवा संरक्षक की आज्ञा बनि किसी स्त्री द्वारा दी गई भेंट को भी तू स्वीकार नहीं करेगा। किसी भी रोगी के घर में तू किसी ऐसे व्यक्ति के साथ ही प्रवेश करेगा जो रोगी का परिचित हो अथवा उसने रोगी की आज्ञा ले रखी हो। तू अपने शरीर को भली-भाँति ढिके रहेगा, धीर की भाँति सिर झुकाए रहेगा तथा बार-बार वचन करके ही आचरण करेगा। गृह में प्रवेश करने के पश्चात् तेरी वाणी, मसृष्टिक, बुद्धि तथा ज्ञानेन्द्रियाँ पूर्ण रूप से केवल रोगी की सहायता के तथा उसी से सम्बन्धित बातों के अतिरिक्त किसी अन्य वचन में रत नहीं होंगी।
- रोगी के गृह के वशिष्ट रीतिरिवाजों के बारे में तू अन्य किसी को भी कुछ नहीं बताएगा। यह जानते हुए भी कि रोगी की जीवनलीला समाप्त होने वाली है, तू इस बात को वहाँ किसी से भी नहीं कहेगा अन्यथा रोगी या अन्य व्यक्तियों को धक्का लगेगा। "भले ही तू कतिना ही ज्ञान प्राप्त कर चुका हो, तुझे अपने ज्ञान की बड़ाई नहीं करनी होगी। अधिकांश व्यक्तियों उन व्यक्तियों के श्रेणी बघारने से चढ़ि उठते हैं जो अन्यथा भले एवं वशिष्ठ होते हैं।

### Problems with this Indian oath :

1. This oath reflects the feudal past of India. In many areas of this oath, allegiance to the king is stressed repeatedly.

2. The oath reflects a certain puritan mentality. Doctors (obviously male) are expected to be celibate and vegetarian!!

3. This oath stresses on the need to remain under the teacher throughout life. But this mentality is not acceptable in modern society. Now, after passing out of college, the young doctors are expected to fend for themselves. Hence, allegiance to the teacher is not important now. Many people will emigrate for better salary to other places. There, they have to be on their own.

4. It is said that doctors should perform no sin. But what is sin? The definition of sin changes with time. For example, 500 years ago, touching a lower caste person was a sin for a Brahmin. But is it so now?

5. This oath forbids accepting gift from female patients. But this mentality is outdated now.

6. It is said that the doctor should not treat anyone who is against the king. But this is a fundamental violation of human rights. Doctors have to treat anyone in need.

So, there are various oaths and different parts of the world use different versions. When a young doctor reads the oath at the end of medical school, often the version is determined by the school authority and the youngster is not in a position to choose a particular oath. But later in life, he/she may find another oath more appropriate. What is important is to imbibe the basic good qualities (avoiding limitations) of all versions. For example, the American modification of the Hippocratic oath (Lasagna) has a very good point: don't be afraid to say "I do not know".

Also, many of the oaths end with the wishful thinking that if doctors follow the tenets, they may enjoy a fruitful life and reputation. But this wish mostly does not come true. Even if a doctor does everything according to moral standards, now he/she can be trapped in a consumer case and this may destroy his/her social position completely. That is why the modern Geneva declarations do not have this utopian point about social prestige or a good life any more.

### Common misconceptions :

In the popular media, there are many misconceptions about medical oath

1. The oath taking is often glorified in movies and TV dramas. But the sense of duty to humanity develops inside a doctor throughout the six years of medical

training. Not at one moment of oath taking.

2. The oath is thus more important as a ceremony than an actual guide to doctors

3. The oath is not concerned with the business aspect of medicine. Like any other profession on this planet, medical profession is also a business (guided by consumer laws) where the doctor can expect fair remuneration for his/her services. These charges are determined by the market like other essential commodities (food, electricity etc.) Some people in Indian media often cite this oath as a proof of selfless and free service of doctors. Doctors do a lot of selfless service anyway without the need for invoking the oath. But the oath does not direct them to work for free. (this is the fundamental problem of physicians now: by Indian law the medical field is a business {since it is governed by consumer laws}, but by their training, it is supposed to be a selfless service)

4. After the 2017 Geneva declaration, a doctor has

full right to take care of his own health. Thus, service to humanity must be balanced with self-care. A doctor should not jeopardize his/her own health for undue reasons.

5. A doctor should not expect in modern society that just because he/she has taken the oath, the society will give him/her a good life or reputation. The doctor has taken the oath to serve the society. The society has not taken any oath to reciprocate!!!!

There are many medical schools in the world that does not administer any oath at the end of medical training. Does it matter? Certainly not. What is important is the fact that modern doctors should act according to their inner conscience and available evidence. The medical code does not demand anything superhuman from doctors. It just states that doctors should be human.

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