What’s in an oath?

College lecture

Contrary to popular belief, the Hippocratic Oath (the Oath) is no fixed and unalterable document of medical ethics, but has been constantly modified over the centuries. Nor was it ever widely sworn or imposed as a condition for obtaining a degree or entering practice. The earliest certain evidence for the Oath taken in a university comes from 1558, and not until 1804 is there evidence for it being sworn by graduands or students. The demand for medical oaths and declarations is largely a feature of the second half of the twentieth century, favoured by physicians but often viewed with suspicion by patients.

The Hippocratic Oath is the most famous document of Western medicine. It is revered as the very basis of medical ethics and equally derided as outdated and irrelevant; in the press and media as well as in medical meetings there are demands for its reinstatement or for its replacement, and equally vigorous debates about what that replacement should be. And yet, in this turmoil of medical morality, and despite years, if not centuries, of philological endeavour, there are still questions which remain to be answered properly; and there are conclusions and arguments that, for all their relevance, have gone apparently unnoticed by those who most champion the merits of the Oath. This paper looks for answers to three apparently naive questions: what was the Hippocratic Oath, who swore it, and what did the non-medical public think of it?

What was the Hippocratic Oath?

The answer to the first question, ‘what was the Hippocratic Oath?’, is at first sight extremely easy. It is a short piece of Greek prose that has been transmitted to us over the centuries along with other writings associated with the name of Hippocrates of Cos [1]. The historical Hippocrates was the most famous doctor of ancient Greece and was teaching in Athens around 420 BC. Whether or not he was the actual author of the Oath is irrelevant except, and for some this is an important exception, in as much as it may link a prime document of medical morality with a man who, as one ancient writer put it, was the first to separate medicine from philosophy, i.e. the person who gave medicine its independence [2]. As a document it is an annoying combination of the global and the particular. The apparently specific ‘I shall not give a woman a destructive pessary’ is immediately followed by the all-embracing and rather vague affirmation that the doctor will preserve his own life in purity and holiness. Within the Oath there are three different elements: the religious prologue and conclusion, calling on the gods to witness and to punish; secondly, a rehearsal of one’s obligations to one’s teachers and their family; and finally, the wider ethical injunctions to help the sick and refrain from a variety of dangerous, deadly, or immoral activities.

Classical scholars have reconstructed almost exactly the original form and wording of the Oath as it was written around 400 BC, but that is far from being the whole story. For, whatever the intention of its creator, if there is any one thing that has characterised the Hippocratic Oath in its passage over the centuries it has been its fluidity, its changeability. Far from being a fixed and formal document, it has constantly been modified for reasons both good and bad; to take one simple example, what has appeared in recent articles in the medical and national press as an English version of the Oath differs considerably in both form and content from the Greek original [3]. Those who appeal to the longevity of the Oath should be wary of its chameleon-like ability to mutate in a variety of ways.

First, there are changes in language. The Oath is written in the Ionic dialect of Greek, not, incidentally, the type of ancient Greek spoken on the island of Cos: and, as time went on, and as the Greek language itself changed, it became even more difficult to understand. Just as today Shakespeare’s Welshmen require a dictionary in order to be understood, and non-Scots recoil at unadulterated Burns, so too, even in antiquity, there were those who required the wording of the Oath to be standardised to conform to proper Greek. The oldest surviving fragment of the Oath, on a papyrus from Egypt written around 300 AD, the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2547, already shows signs of this normalisation of wording, and several of our manuscripts come accompanied with glosses to explain difficult words.

Far more interesting than the changes in words are the changes of substance. Some were obvious and easy: the roll-call of divinities that opens the Oath—Apollo the physician, Asclepius, Hygeia, Panacea, and all the gods and goddesses—had little or no place in a Jewish, Christian or Muslim universe, and could be neatly replaced or supplemented by the appropriate form of the Godhead. The Arabic Oath begins by calling upon...
Allah, the master of life and death, the giver of health, and the creator of healing and of every treatment, before going on to invoke Asclepius. In several of our manuscripts the Oath is written in the form of a cross, with Christian invocations instead of the pagan, a double Christianisation [4].

More substantial modifications were made to the second section, in which the intending physician swears to honour his teacher as his own parents, to make him a partner in his own livelihood; to share his money with him when he is in need; to consider his family as one of his own; and to teach his sons without fee or indenture. Such an oath might have been appropriate in a society where ties of family and craft were strong, and where the author of the Oath was concerned to keep the secrets of medicine within a quasi-familial group, but later doctors were not so willing to subsidise their old teachers, let alone their children. One early copyist removed all references to the teacher’s dependants, and this second section disappears entirely in what some scholars have called the Christian version of the Oath. The doctor no longer has any obligations, financial or otherwise, to his colleagues, and the stipulation that he shall teach without fee is replaced by an injunction to teach without grudging. To put it in modern terms, the student must pay, and the teacher must accept quality assessment.

The same Christian version also introduced two further changes: the ban on abortion was strengthened by removing any suggestion that it was only the giving of an abortive pessary that was forbidden. Abortion, it should be recalled, does not appear to have been illegal in classical Greece, and Roman law, from the mid-third century AD on, prohibits only the administration of abortive drugs. Several texts in the Hippocratic Corpus report with apparent approval a variety of methods, including drugs, for procuring an abortion. Now in a new religious environment, the word ‘pessary’ is dropped and the section is combined with, or replaces, the following sentence on surgery. No longer is the physician barred from the use of the knife, but only from what will cause an abortion, whether applied from above or below [5].

It was not only in the Middle Ages, from which these examples have so far been largely drawn, that the Oath underwent modification. Thomas Newton, in his English version of 1586, reflected Elizabethan charity in transferring the Oath’s recommendations on fees from students to patients: ‘I shall not be squeamish to bestow my skill in this Arte upon the poore and needle, without either fee or other covenein certainly agreed upon’ [6]. In the nineteenth century, words like holiness and purity, with their heavily religious overtones, disappear from some texts and translations of the Oath. The modern English version given by The Times and other newspapers makes specific what in the original are more general rules: so, for example, the ban on a doctor deliberately causing a person’s death on request is interpreted solely as a reference to assisted suicide, although the original would encompass also euthanasia and medical participation in brutality and murder for social or political gain. Sexual misdemeanours are now emphasised above damage to property, and the phrase over which so much ink has been spilled: ‘I shall not cut, not even for the stone’, a ban on all forms of surgery, is turned into a rule entirely and solely against lithotomy, ‘even for patients to whom the disease is manifest’. Quite why this procedure alone should be forbidden to physicians in 1995, but permitted to others, is not at all clear, and the last clause in particular has been introduced without any justification, textual, historical, or even medical [7]. Another version, lately introduced at Johns Hopkins, now deliberately glosses over the section on abortion.

What all this means is that the Hippocratic Oath is not, and never has been, a fixed, unalterable document. Over the years, copyists, would-be Oath takers and would-be Oath breakers have modified its language and sentiments as they have seen fit. In particular, far from the Oath imposing its values on society, it has always been society that has imposed its interpretation and values on what that Oath is and means, and it has been constantly changed to accommodate the demands, the concerns, and, at times, the prejudices, of society at large. Those who appeal to the eternal verities of the Oath have had, almost of necessity, to select what these verities are to be, and to remove, retranslate or at least disregard passages considered inappropriate for their own society. Hence the paradox that one might well approve of the moral sentiments of those who call for a return to Hippocrates while, at the same time, condemning their logic in seeking to impose a mix-and-match version of the very Oath they revere.

Who swore the Oath?

The second question, whether the Oath was actually sworn, occasioned an interesting correspondence in the recent columns of the British Medical Journal. While it made clear that medical students continue to take the Oath (and oaths) in some medical schools, only one writer looked back to a previous century, and none recognised what the rest of this paper will show, namely that the importance of the Hippocratic Oath as a document to be formally sworn as part of the ceremonies and procedures by which one becomes a doctor is a feature largely of this century, if not of the last few decades [8]. This does not mean that some people did not, at some points and places in history, take the Hippocratic Oath, or that taking an oath of some sort has not been a frequent part of a graduation or matriculation ceremony. Rather, for the most part, the Hippocratic Oath qua oath has played a somewhat marginal role in medicine until relatively recent times.

Those brought up to believe that Greek doctors swore the Hippocratic Oath, perhaps as they sat on
Cos under the equally dubious plane tree, may well be shocked at this cavalier dismissal of a cherished belief. But few classicists would wish to contradict the great German-American scholar Ludwig Edelstein, who concluded that in their practice and in their ethics most ancient Greek and Roman doctors did not follow the Hippocratic Oath [9]. They assisted in suicide and abortion without suffering condemnation; even Hippocrates himself taught for money; and they performed complicated surgery as well as lithotomy without a qualm. Their ethic was performance-based: whatever helped the sick was ipso facto moral. In short, the Hippocratic Oath is unrepresentative of Greek medical thinking; it reflects the ideas of a small group, not those of physicians and healers in general. It was, and always remained, an oath for a small minority, whatever the aspirations of its author.

Certainly, it was never imposed as a qualification for practice. When around AD 47, a doctor called Scribonius Largus sat down to write his drugbook, he called in vain for a return to the Hippocratic Oath, and the discipline that it implied—as an old army man, he was fond of this military imagery. In his view, being a doctor, or, rather, announcing formally that one was a doctor, which is all that professio medici means, should bring with it the ethical obligations detailed in the Oath: the doctor’s morality comes with his job: he acts morally because he is a doctor. This is a powerful plea for what moral philosophers call deontological ethics: joining a group imparts certain obligations on a member that are not necessarily imposed on society at large. But, at the same time, Scribonius makes it quite clear that reality is very different: there are no oaths, no systems of medical discipline, no moral rules. There is a medical free-for-all, in which those who are physicians are being supplanted by those who merely supply the sick with drugs. A return to the Hippocratic Oath with its moral message, one might almost say advertising, would, in Scribonius’s view, assuredly bring paying patients in its train [10].

Scribonius’s description of the medical scene in his own day is accurate. In antiquity there were no qualifying examinations to pass, no fellowships or faculties. Indeed, at times all that was needed to become a doctor was one’s professio, a statement that one was a healer. Witness a law case in the year 142 in Roman Egypt, when a doctor called Psasnis appealed to the governor after the tax privileges given to all doctors in law had been taken away from him by his local community. ‘Maybe that was because you were a rotten doctor’, joked the governor, ‘Nevertheless’—and this is the crucial point—‘return to your local district, appear before the local tax officer, and merely by affirming that you are a doctor you will regain all your lost privileges’ [11]. Nothing more is required, merely a professio, an affidavit.

Half a century later, around 200 AD, an author, almost certainly the great physician Galen of Pergamum, composed a commentary on the Hippocratic Oath. Its contents, partly preserved in an Arabic translation, display an exuberant learning: if you want to know, for instance, why Asclepius is often portrayed accompanied by a snake, Galen will tell you; snakes never sleep and thus they signify the doctor’s eternal vigilance. What is missing from this commentary, and indeed from any of the 20,000 pages of Galen’s writings, is any suggestion that the Hippocratic Oath was being sworn at the time. When Galen, as he frequently does, appeals to Hippocrates for instruction on the way the doctor should behave, it is not to the Oath, but to Hippocratic practice that he looks—to Hippocrates who treated princes and paupers alike, but who refused to attend the King of Persia, despite promises of an enormous fee, because that would have meant treating an enemy of his fatherland. Galen stresses Hippocratic advice to be careful about one’s clothes, manners, speech, nails and even hairstyle. Good behaviour, appropriate dress, knowing when to tell a joke and a refusal to bow down to fleeting fashion—no flowing locks or shaven heads for Galen—will all give the patient the confidence necessary for recovery: self-interest, not an imposed morality, will prompt the behaviour that best secures the patient’s health. Given Galen’s devotion, indeed self-dedication, to Hippocrates this silence on the Oath as an essential condition of practice is eloquent [12].

But did any group in antiquity ever swear the Oath? Two Christian authors have often been thought to imply that medical students took the Oath in the late fourth century of the Christian era. But both passages present difficulties. In the first, St Jerome declares that Hippocrates compelled his pupils, by an oath, to adopt certain rules of conduct with regard to silence, speech, gait, dress and character. But ‘speech, gait and dress’ form no part of the Oath as we know it, and, most likely, Jerome was merely combining what he knew of the Oath with the passage in Hippocrates’ Epidemices that forms the basis for the ideas of Galen on medical morality discussed earlier [13]. Jerome was imagining a hypothetical situation sometime in the past, not describing something happening in his own day.

A better witness is St Gregory of Nazianzus, who claims that his own brother, Caesarius, as a medical student was so moral and so upright a Christian that he had ‘no need of Hippocrates to administer to him the Oath’ [14]. Historians have long debated the precise implication of Gregory’s words: yet two points are clear. Caesarius did not swear the Oath, and, since Gregory is silent on so sensitive a matter, he had not faced any sort of compulsion to swear. In other words, if the Oath was taken by some medical students, it was by personal and private choice. But Gregory was no fool, and if the Oath was ever sworn, fourth-century Alexandria, where Caesarius studied medicine, offers the most likely time, place and indeed motivation. Alexandria in Egypt was for centuries the greatest medical centre in the world; it was, as one contemporary put it, the foundation of health for all men. Its
teachers professed the medicine of Hippocrates as explained and interpreted by Galen; they lived and breathed Hippocrates. Furthermore, as Owsei Temkin has movingly shown in his *Hippocrates in a world of pagans and Christians*, a book that should be essential reading for all interested in the development of medical ethics, it was precisely in fourth- and fifth-century Alexandria that the most vigorous pagan opposition to Christianity was to be found, often involving bloodshed and even murder [15]. One can well imagine non-Christian medical students and their teachers coming together under the familiar protection of Asclepius, and thereby intensifying their paganism in reaction to the persecution by the Christians. What need have we of Christian morality, a pagan Gregory might say, if we have the Hippocratic Oath? Such speculation is tempting, but one should not lose sight of the essential point. Swearing the *Oath* was an option, perhaps taken by a minority in one place at one time. It was never imposed by law or custom, neither in pagan Greece and Rome, nor in the Muslim world, nor in medieval Europe. Even when authorities demanded that physicians should be in some way qualified, they did not invoke or impose the Hippocratic Oath.

Instead, where we do find some form of swearing or moral affidavit, it was a more restricted and, one might say, a more professional declaration. It was a form of job description, in which the candidate swore to uphold the good name and training of his college, university or other institution. It pledged obedience to the relevant authority, whether monarch, bishop or town council, and frequently laid down in detail just what was expected of the future doctor or surgeon, what he could prescribe, where he could practise, when and how he might visit the sick, even at times the level of fees permitted [16]. While there might be echoes of the Hippocratic Oath in language and sentiment, these ‘professional’ oaths were designed as much for the good of the institution as for that of the patient. The oath prescribed under statutes of this College, as revised in 1555 under the presidency of John Caius, committed its members to pursuing by honest means all ignorant empirics and quacks, to refraining from prescribing over-expensive drugs to gain the favour of the pharmacist, and to reading within a year the first five books of Galen, *On simples*, and the first eight books of his *On the use of parts*. By 1647, the candidate swore merely to obey the statutes, including the delightful paragraph on ‘moral conversation’, with its injunction against traducing a colleague’s opinion by facial expression, gesture or suspicious silence [17].

When then does the Hippocratic Oath come to be sworn in any university or medical college? This is a question that is, as yet, unanswered—some might say, unanswerable, for the taking of the *Oath* may well have developed informally out of individual initiative, and the records of the past rarely allow us an insight into the informal side of a medical student’s life. That the Hippocratic Oath is sworn today in some universities throughout the world is clear from correspondence in the *British Medical Journal*, but when this custom began is harder to determine [18]. Statements in secondary sources frequently turn out to be based on error and misapprehension, and anecdotal evidence is often fallible. It is also at times unclear, particularly in this century, just what form of the *Oath* is being administered. All this makes tracing the history of the administration of the Hippocratic Oath extraordinarily difficult, and it is not surprising that attempts have been few and far between.

The first clear evidence for use of the *Oath* in a university context comes from the foundation statutes of the German medical faculty of Wittenberg, in 1508. Its doctor’s oath, composed by the rector and first professor of medicine, Martin Pollich von Mellerstadt, incorporates some of the wording of the Hippocratic Oath [19]. A similar procedure characterises the doctor’s oath of the university of Basel as formulated in the new statutes of 1570. There the medical graduate swore on oath by ‘God the One and Three, the father of Hygeia and Panacea’, a wondrous combination of Christianity and the classics which continued to be sworn until 1868. The provisions of this oath combine in a similarly discordant fashion the widest and most sonorous of Hippocratic moral injunctions with thanks to the burghers of Basel. At roughly the same time, at the university of Freiburg im Breisgau, someone copied into the front cover of the Statute Book a Latin translation of the Hippocratic Oath, but whether this was ever administered is doubtful. Verbal echoes can be found also in the 1607 statutes of Giessen. Only two universities go beyond verbal allusion. When in 1558 the statutes of the university of Heidelberg were revised, they laid down that the Dean of the medical faculty should within one month of taking office publicly affirm the Hippocratic Oath and promise to adhere to its provisions until the end of his years of office. Note that it is the Dean, not the students or graduands, who must take the *Oath*, and that his obligations to it cease with his retirement from his post. Only at the University of Jena, founded in 1558, do the statutes mention the *Oath* as something to be observed more widely. Before being admitted to the doctorate of medicine, graduands had to agree to carry out in their medical practice ‘everything that Hippocrates demands in his *Oath* and in his book *On the physician’.* This provision remained in force for at least two centuries, for it was still included when the statutes were revised in 1785 [20].

But why the sixteenth century, and why Germany? The answer is simple. The revival of classical learning in the Renaissance led many to consider that the ideal modern doctor should be the heir to the Hippocratic inheritance, in word as well as in deed. These, in many cases new, German universities stood at the very forefront of this medical renaissance; their medical pro-
fessors had learned in Italy the truths of Galen and Hippocrates, and brought this humanist medicine north of the Alps. Martin Mellerstadt at Wittenberg, like Johannes Lange at Heidelberg, Johannes Schroeter and Janus Cornarius at Jena, and Theodor Zwinger at Basel, enjoyed European fame for his mastery of ancient medicine, while the professors of Freiburg imposed the most classical of syllabuses on their medical students. To associate fidelity to Hippocratic morals with the traditional loyalty to one’s state and university was also to show that one was fully abreast of the very latest trends in medicine and medical education [21].

But what of places beyond Germany? In 1771, John Morgan, an Edinburgh graduate, speaking at the conferment of the first doctorate of medicine at the College of Philadelphia, declared that the Oath prescribed by Hippocrates to his disciples had been generally adopted in universities and schools of physic. His college, however, which was a free spirit among institutions, had no need of such oaths; it wished only to bind its sons and graduates by the ties of honour and gratitude [22]. But was Morgan right? Oaths there were aplenty in 1771, but almost all were of the traditional ‘loyalty’ type, binding graduates of all faculties to obey the statutes and their ruler. That was the case at Leiden and Edinburgh, despite modern assertions to the contrary, as well as at Montpellier. At Edinburgh in 1705 the Sponsio incorporated the last sections of the Hippocratic Oath in Latin, but from 1731 until at least 1867, this was replaced by a shorter and much vaguer affirmation. But from the 1750s onwards in Germany, there developed specifically medical oaths, combining loyalty to state and university with more generalised moral affirmations about what a doctor should do or think; but of the Hippocratic Oath itself there are at best a few verbal echoes [23].

Wider political, religious and social developments in the nineteenth century, which swept away many of the older loyalty oaths, at the same time allowed doctors to formulate declarations in which a specifically medical, or even Hippocratic, morality became far more prominent than before. Thus in the aftermath of the French revolution, according to regulations passed on 5 July 1804, a medical graduate at Montpellier had to stand before a bust of Hippocrates, specially donated by the French government, recite the Hippocratic Oath in Latin and promise, in the name of God, to be faithful to the laws of man and of honour in the exercise of medicine. This is, as far as I know, the earliest instance of an actual student or graduand swearing the Oath in a university context [24]. Montpellier’s example, although without the looming presence of Hippocrates, was later followed in Paris and, much more recently, in Strasbourg. But nowhere was the call for morality in medicine more strident than in the USA, where in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s concern for the imposition of codes of medical ethics, and, in particular, for the Hippocratic Oath was widespread among orthodox practitioners [25].

By 1880, however, this first wave of Hippocratic Oathmanship had begun to ebb. There were complaints that no longer were the young familiar with its message; where it was taken, as at McGill or at St Thomas’s, it was increasingly viewed as an anachronism, a sign of a tradition-bound institution in an age of progress. It was not adopted at the newer universities, in Britain or on the continent, and, where it did continue, it was taken lightly. Some demanded modification, a Hippocratic Oath for a new century, whose image no longer worked against the interests of the medical profession. John Round, of the Battersea General Hospital, pleading in 1919 for its replacement, pointed to an unwanted consequence. The London police paid a veterinary surgeon 19s 6d if summoned to care for an injured animal, but paid the doctor of medicine only 3s 6d for a person. ‘The reason can only be this: the veterinary surgeon is regarded as a man out to earn his living whilst the physician is supposed to exist for the public good’ [26]. Hippocratic morality, one might say, can seriously damage your wealth.

Medical oaths and demands for a re-imposition of Hippocratic morality are thus nothing new. But this formulation is also misleading for it disguises the extent to which this return to Hippocrates, to oaths, declaration and formal professions of the doctor’s ethical beliefs, is a phenomenon of the second half of this century. The figures Dale Smith has collected for the USA and Canada are particularly striking in this respect. In 1928, some twenty medical schools, none in Canada, used the Hippocratic Oath or a version of it, 14 at graduation, one at commencement; one gave it only to their best students; one, optimistically one might think, read it at an Old Boys’ dinner. By 1965, 69 out of 97 medical schools used a medical oath; 12 years later, the numbers had risen to 108 out of 128; and by 1989, to at least 119, 60 of whom claimed to be administering some variant of the Hippocratic Oath. The same trend is also visible in British medical schools, as well as on the continent, where references to the morality implicit in the Oath reappear from the 1960s onwards [27].

Why this demand for oaths and declarations, and for a return to Hippocrates? First, it is a reflection of a society becoming more formal, of school proms, May Balls, and of formal admission ceremonies. Twenty-five years ago, the young were demanding the abolition of such elitist spectacles; today they flock in numbers to them. That may be a trivial, but not entirely irrelevant, factor.

Secondly, many of the moral dilemmas to which the Hippocratic Oath or similar affirmations are now supposed to provide the answer were in the past not dilemmas at all. The overall ethic of a Christian, Jewish or Muslim society excluded abortion, medical murder and euthanasia, adultery, even hot gossip and tattle-tale; society imposed duties of charity and kindness, even of holiness. The Oath at best reinforced an over-
all moral ethic. But in an increasingly secular Western society, with a widening range of choices available both in personal conduct and in medical therapeutics, and where the problems facing the physician appear ever more complex, the Oath and similar declarations offer a replacement for religious values, a replacement that gains in authority and in imagined stability precisely because of its age. It also announces solemnly an orientation of goodwill that goes beyond the formal framework of law and statutes.

Thirdly, there is the whole question of professionalisation, of what it means to be a doctor. Here an oath takes on two aspects, one exclusive, one inclusive. It excludes from the right to call themselves proper physicians those who do not adhere to its sentiments, or who practise other forms of healing. The Hippocratic Oath marked off the physician from those who used the knife; early modern university and college oaths defended their members' rights to practise against surgeons, empirics, quacks, and the like. Whether a hundred years from now historians will associate the recent revival of interest in the Hippocratic Oath with the boom in alternative healing of all kinds, much of it taught and performed outside traditional medical structures, is a thought worth pondering.

Finally, oaths bind; they not only bind the swearer to his or her duties, but to all those who are part of the same group. In academic oaths, respect for one's institution is often allied to respect for the patient in a way that emphasises that the welfare of the one and the reputation of the other hang together. As medicine becomes more and more specialised, more and more fragmented, and more varied in its approaches, these declarations of principle can serve to build bridges across the disciplines, and to emphasise the wholeness of medicine by stressing a unity of basic values. They have no legal function, they are frequently ahistorical, they are often linked with a great name, be it of an individual or an institution. They have become a symbol, meta- or suprahistorical, and as such they are immune to criticism on the grounds of historical accuracy or relevance. It matters little that the Hippocratic Oath has been constantly changed since its invention, in a variety of ways; and that there is small evidence that it was ever sworn, let alone religiously adhered to, before the nineteenth century. The objection that most claims made for its usage push back into the remote past a situation that is largely of this century, if not of the last thirty years, does not affect those who wish to invoke an oath for our own time, but only those who wish to justify it on historical grounds.

What did the non-medical public think of the Oath?

This is the comment of a historian and a layman, aware of the frequently negative response of the laity to the Hippocratic and similar oaths over the centuries. The medical oath has been seen as an invitation to a medical conspiracy to murder, and a mark of a closed-shop unionism that bans competition, imposes the physicians' writ on all other healers, and closes ranks against the outside world, especially in the face of patients' complaints [28]. Besides, and perhaps inconsistently, the laity have at the same time insisted, and continue to insist, that a doctor should be aware of moral values and act in accordance with them. Candidates for public posts in Greece, Rome and medieval Italy were selected as much for their morality as for their skill, and the dilemma whether to choose an honest but limited doctor over one more skilled, but less scrupulous, goes back a very long way [29].

But at the end of a century when they have so often been ignored in the name of politics and, more insidiously still, of science, the Hippocratic principles of the primacy of the patient's welfare and the doctor's healing impulse offer an ethical orientation which resonates strongly with lay expectations. Historical reflection suggests that medical declarations of morality have had greater success when they have involved the laity as well as the medical profession, the state and the patient as well as the practitioner [30]. Whatever the outcome of the modern debate in this country, and of the various appeals to historical precedent or to universal ethical values; whether one prefers Hippocrates revised, modernised, truncated or translated, one thing is clear: an oath is not something to be taken lightly. The author of the venerable Hippocratic Oath laid an important foundation for the development of ethical medicine, but substantial reformulation is required if its spirit and values rather than its increasing misunderstanding or inappropriate phraseology can continue to serve and inspire his professional descendants in the twenty-first century.

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Notes and references

1 Most accessible text and translation in Edelstein L. Ancient medicine. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, (repr. 1987):4–5. Still relevant are the text and discussion of Petrequin JE. Chirurgie d'Hippocrate. I, Paris; Imprimerie nationale, 1877: 170–98.
2 Edelstein, and most scholars, believe that Hippocrates was not the author; a vigorous, if somewhat unconvincing, protest comes from Lichtenhaeler C. Der Eid des Hippokrates. Cologne: Deutscher Arztverlag, 1984.
3 The Observer 2 July 1995: 5; The Times 5 July 1995: 6. This version differs considerably from that of Edelstein, or of other accessible English translations such as Adams F. The genuine works of Hippocrates. London: Sydenham Society, 1849, and often reprinted; Jones WHS. Hippocrates, vol. 1. London: Heinemann, 1923; Chadwick J, Mann WN. The medical works of Hippocrates. Oxford: Blackwell, 1950.
4 The significance of these changes in the manuscripts and early translations is best explained by Jones WHS. The doctor’s oath. Cambridge University Press, 1924.

5 Riddle JM. Contraception and abortion from the ancient world to the Renaissance. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992. None of the Roman legal texts is entirely free from suspicion of later Christian editing.

6 Larkey SV. The Hippocratic Oath in Elizabethan England. Bull Hist Med 1956;20:201–20.

7 I have so far been unable to trace the source of this version, but it was known in the USA in the 1950s. Older translators, eg Adams, translated the sentence to refer solely to lithotomy; more recent ones take it as a ban on all forms of cutting, even on (relatively simple) lithotomy.

8 Loudon I. The Hippocratic Oath. Br Med J 1994;309:414; responses printed in ibid. 952–3.

9 Edelstein, op. cit., note 1 above. But few would now agree with him that the minority group was Pythagorean.

10 Text in Scribonius Largus. Compositioes. Leipzig: Teubner, 1983; a (flawed) English version of the preface is by Hamilton J S. Scribonius Largus on the medical profession. Bull Hist Med 1986;60:209–16.

11 Osyrbynchus Papyrus 40.

12 For the Commentary on the Oath, see Rosenthal F. An ancient commentary on the Hippocratic Oath. Bull Hist Med 1956;30:52–87. For Galen’s views in general, see Nutton V. Beyond the Hippocratic Oath. In: Wear A, Geyer-Kordesch J, Porter R (eds). Doctors and ethics. Amsterdam; Rodopi, 1993:10–37.

13 Jerome. Letters 52,15. Some scholars have assumed unnecessarily that Jerome is referring to a variant version of the Oath that is now lost to us.

14 Gregory of Nazianzus. Orations VII.10.

15 Temkin O. Hippocrates in a world of pagans and Christians. Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991: esp. 181–96.

16 Evidence for this type of oath, which was administered by universities, by guilds, by colleges, and by employing and licensing authorities, is widespread. Jones, op. cit., note 4 above, gives a few examples of this type.

17 Clark, Sir G. A history of the Royal College of Physicians of London. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964: I, p388, 414.

18 Delamothe T. Note. Br Med J 1994;309:952–3.

19 Friedensburg W. Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg. Magdeberg, 1996; p48–50.

20 Details in Nolte W. Der hippokratische Eid und die Abschlußfeide der frühere und jetzigen deutschsprachigen Hochschulen—mit ergänzender Betrachtung ausländischer Eide (MD Dissertation), Bochum, 1981, respectively; p73–4 (Wittenberg); 15 (Basel); 34 (Freiburg); 37 (Giessen); 42 (Heidelberg); 50–51 (Jena). Nolte’s dissertation is the only serious historical study of the administration of the Oath in the modern period, but does not leave the mainland of Europe; anglophone countries are thus excluded.

21 Nutton V. Hippocrates in the Renaissance. In: Baader G, Winau R (eds). Die hippokratischen Epidemien. Stuttgart; Steiner Verlag: 1989, 418–39.

22 Cited from the Pennsylvania Gazette by Packard FR. History of Medicine in the United States. New York: PB Hoeber, 1931:1,p368.

23 Nolte. op cit., note 20 above, gives a most useful survey of the development of the specifically medical oath. Morgan’s affirmation might be no more than a rhetorical assimilation of these university oaths to that of Hippocrates. What is more important, it shows that Morgan and his colleagues did not regard any oath, even that of Hippocrates, as essential.

24 Dulle L. La médecine à Montpellier. IV. Paris: Les Presses Universelles, 1988:131–6. God was replaced in 1872 by the Supreme Being.

25 For discussion of the American evidence, and for much else, I am indebted to Dale Smith, whose paper, Hippocrates, the Oath, and modern medicine, was presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine, Pittsburgh, 11 May 1995, and is to be published in a volume on the Hippocratic Oath edited by JM Riddle.

26 Round J. The dawn of a medical union. Western Med Times 1919;39:429–36, a reference I owe to Professor Smith.

27 American figures are taken from Carey E. The formal use of the Hippocratic Oath for medical students at commencement exercises. Bull Am Ass Med Coll 1928;3:159–66; Irish DP, McMurray DW. Professional Oaths in American medical colleges. J Chron Dis 1965;18:175; cf. Grashaw R. Contemporary use of medical oaths, J Chron Dis 1970;23:144–50; Friedland W. Oaths given by US and Canadian medical schools, 1977. Soc Sci Med 1982;66:15–20; Dickstein E, Erlen J, Erlen JA. Ethical principles contained in currently professed medical oath. Acad Med 1991;66:622–4. For the UK, Br Med J 1994;309:953, and The Times 7 July 1995: 19; for the Continent, Nolte, op. cit., note 20 above, 21, 61, 63, 82, and Br Med J 1994;309:953.

28 See the disparaging comment in antiquity by Plutarch, usually sympathetic to doctors. Life of Cato 23.

29 For moral considerations in the choice of ancient and medieval doctors, see Nutton V. From Democedes to Harvey. London: Variorum, 1988, cap. VI. Financial considerations may have been even more pressing.

30 It is unclear just how far swearing an oath, as opposed to abiding by legally imposed regulation, influences medical behaviour. Anecdotal information supports both positions.

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