

## The purpose of the medical ethic of Hippocrates was efficient healing of the patient

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### Abstract

Objective for this paper is to understand the origin of medical ethics in old Greece. Design: Review of Corpus Hippocraticum including the Hippocratic Oath and other sources. Results: The Greeks did not distinguish between a good person and a fine physician. If you had high ethics you would do your best to help and heal wherever you appeared. Hippocrates called his medicine "the art" – the art of true living and the art of fine medicine, combined. Hippocrates had a fundamental principle for inducing the state of healing, which was "to call the patient back" to the cause of the disease. The cause was understood in symbolic and deep psychological ways, using the elements and more, which has been difficult to understand for every generation of physicians ever since Hippocrates, but the principle was simple. The same that makes you sick makes you well aging. Conclusion: Your ability as a physician was a consequence of the degree to which you had developed the goodness of your soul. Your ethics determined you standard as a physician, and your ability to win the trust of the patient. If the patient lacked trust in the physician, there will be no surrender and thus no possibility for receiving support on an existential level and thus no healing of life and existence possible.

**Keywords:** Medical ethics, Hippocrates, healing, mind body medicine, medical history.

### Introduction

A permanent feature of Western medicine has been the stress on ethics, a focus constantly through the millenniums since the father of western medicine, Hippocrates – or at least the physicians of his time – introduced the medical oath. The meaning and importance of the medical oath have been debated extensively in many books and papers. (1-7) Interestingly many researches have found the ethical meaning and practical function of some of the paragraphs of the oath less than clear.

In this paper we argue that all the parts of the Hippocratic oath were actually necessary for the ethical setup of the Hippocratic physician in order for him/her to be able to fully help and heal the patient. Step by step we will go through the paragraphs of the oath to see, what they each contribute to the Hippocratic physician's competence as a healer. We will conclude that it is all about unconditional love and professional intimacy with the high ethics allowing the Hippocratic style physician to come from his heath and provide all kinds of holistic treatments. In a therapeutic space, which is complete confident and allows the most intimate of bodyworks like pelvic massage, we argue that efficient holistic medicine simply cannot be done without such a high ethics and a setup similar to that society, which created the full oath.

## The ethical meaning of the Hippocratic oath

The Hippocratic oath, which is presented below in its full length, is quoted from Jones (1, vol I page 167). We include his notes on the oath for clarification. The Hippocratic oath, the landmark of ethics in medicine, starts with the following:

*I SWEAR by Apollo Physician, by Asclepius, by Hygeia, 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.*

This is the famous opening of the so often discussed oath of Hippocrates (8-21). To swear by the gods was judged from contemporary sources the most powerful commitment a person could do in old Greece. To fail the oath had seemingly the most dire of consequences, like the total condemnation by peers and rejection from the general society. At that time, nobody would want to challenge the gods by failing the 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.*

“This art” is apparently the written rules of the art, examples of which are to be found in several Hippocratic treatises. These books were not published in the strict sense of the word, but copies would be circulated among the members of the “physicians’ union” and “oral instruction” is probably meant as “instruction, written, oral and practical.” Jones (1) was puzzled about the meaning of this part of the oath, which “binds the student to the teacher and his family” and speculates that it might be understood in a spiritual and not a factual sense, as this part of the oath from a modern perspective can be seen as a highly unethical exploitation of the medical student, creating a slave-like relationship with his teacher (1, vol I page 295).

This interpretation arise seemingly from the perspective of a materialistic culture, where much of the motivation for being a physician comes from earning money. But this was hardly the position of Hippocrates and his students, who from the opening statement of the oath seemed highly spiritual and God-devoted people. An interpretation paying respect to the time was that the students aimed to be physicians, who served the other. They came from love and with love to their patient. The student became an integrated part of the physicians family, and this was the purpose of the first and most important part of the oath: to make the student part of the family, to bring such a closeness that unconditional love became the reality in which the student and his teacher lived. The essential reason for this seems to be the holistic physicians urgent need for being able to re-parenting his patient (2) or in other words being as good, and caring to the patient as an ideal parent.

“Life is short, the art is long” is the most famous of the Hippocratic aphorisms. Throughout the whole Corpus Hippocraticus, about 70 books on medicine from that time and region, there is no distinction between the art of living and the art of practicing medicine. This is extremely difficult to understand from a modern perspective, where a physician is trained in so much specific knowledge, which is only useful to a physician. The knowledge of the Corpus Hippocraticum include medical knowledge of this kind also, but hardly more that can be printed on

about 20 normal pages of systematized writing. What it really includes is a lot of generalised knowledge, theory and philosophy of human life and human character, on the energetic and spiritual design of man and the universe – knowledge which at that time doomed from other sources like Plato was taken to be necessary to lead a sound and great life in a loving and rewarding mutual relationship with others, and to be a coherent part of the world.

The reason for this combination of ethical living and medical practice was the fact that the Hippocratic physician used his knowledge in both areas: both to live with others and to help the sick. As he always came from and with a good intention there was really no difference in the two: the physician was a carrier of the art, a great man and a great healer in one.

“Where the love of man is, there is the love of the art” wrote the writer of Precepts later (1, vol I page 296), the art being this combination of medicine and the right living. “That medicine is an art...a difficult art, and one inseparable from the highest morality and the love of humanity, is the great lesson to us of the Hippocratic writings”, Jones concluded and with that we can only agree fully (1, vol I page 296). The Hippocratic medicine was about love for man. Love was also an absolute precondition for the Hippocratic medicine to work. This love of the physician had to be so unconditional, so absolute and so pure, that it was only the most intense, the closest and the most family-like love that could create the physician.

The only way a student could be taught *the art* was by receiving this kind of love himself and for the student to be in this position, he had to accept a similar relationship with his teacher as he already had with his parents. He needed to be a part of the physician’s family. This assimilation into the family was created by the student’s perspective that his teacher and the teacher’s family was equal to his own family. Thus this paragraph of the oath.

*I will use treatment to heal the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrongdoing. 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.*

“But I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art.” This is really the essence of the oath. Not to cause harm is really an important part of the oath. The physician is a good man/woman. He cannot afford to be associated with things that jeopardize this fundamental fact. With the development of chemistry and surgery and development of society into the few-child core-family structure, things have changed and so also for the modern physician, but basically this is still the ethics of a modern physician.

*Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrongdoing 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 forever reputation among all men for my life and for my art; but if I transgress it and forswear myself, may the opposite befall me.*

The remarkable addition about confidentiality is worthy of a passing notice. The physician must not gossip, no matter how or where the subject-matter for gossip may have been acquired; whether it be in practice or in private life makes no difference.

When love was well taken care of in the oath, Hippocrates continued to the other areas of crucial importance: coming from a good intention, not giving poison or inducing abortion, not harming the patient, keeping life and art holy, keeping full confidentiality in professional and in private life, the respect for the sexual borders of others, man as woman, both patients and non patients, bond or free. As Jones (1) points out in a remarkable note to the oath, “The physician must not gossip, no matter how or where the subject/matter for gossip may have been acquired; whether it be in practice or in private life makes no difference” (1).

Hippocrates also treated slaves in the same way as free men, which was highly unusual at that time (22). This is a great universe of humanity and compassion. It really it is no wonder that this tradition lasted so long and that Hippocrates and his students had that tremendous impact on all the following ages until this day.

So this is the meaning of the oath: The physician has to promise to be a good man/woman, to love his

teacher unconditionally and all of his family like his own brother, never to gossip or abuse anybody, always to come from the hearth with good intention and never to cause harm. The oath took the stretch to the limit, it helped the physician not only to be the best physician he possibly could, but also the best person he possibly could be. The important thing to notice is that Hippocrates' oath forced the physician to be a good hearted, devoted and passionate physician. The important question now is: why was this extremely high level of ethics necessary?

Hippocrates was a brave man and no area of the patient's body was out of his reach and every possible issue of life was a job for a Hippocratic physician. Much of the complains of woman was, as is the case today, centred around her pelvis and genitals (he had a diagnosis he called hysteria (1, vol I page 167)) and Hippocrates seemingly worked with full vaginal exploration (1, vol III page 171) and bodywork, using ointments and massage on the pelvis. The Hippocratic physicians seemingly worked from the outside inwards, through the physical openings (23, vol II page 275, vol II page 511). *Corpus Hippocraticum* contains descriptions of the physician experience of the pelvis and vagina, and describe how the tissue sometimes "turns hard", which is explained by the blockage in this region, which can be reversed by care. This is very similar to the healing work in today's holistic medical clinic (24,25) and such phenomena are fairly well explained by the holistic process theory of healing (2,26). This close contact with the female genitalia and pelvic region was what made a strict sexual ethics a *sine qua non*. If the physician abused the woman for his own pleasure, this would completely destroy any possibility for trust, intimacy and healing in the gynaecological area of medicine.

But Hippocrates medicine was based on something much bigger than respect for the patient's sexual borders. It was based on love. With love and good intentions meeting the patient and contacting her body and organs manually with respect for the sexual borders can induce healing. Without love and respect for her sexual borders it is very difficult and not even helpful. The student becomes a child of the physician and integrate in the family almost equal to the sons and daughters of the teacher's family. The

patients are children of the physician, as are the students.

What a Hippocratic physician in essence does is to give love, in the forms of attention, respect, care, acceptance and acknowledgment (27) in order to induce healing and create coherence, (28,29) order (compare "Ordnung therapie" in Germany) (30) and balance in the life of the patient. What has been lost in our materialistic and chemically oriented medical culture of modern time is all what the oath of Hippocrates intended a physician to never forget: love of his fellow man and behave. With the loss of love, the possibility of the physician to heal his patients is also lost and that is a most regretful loss that we must do whatever we can to make up for.

The reason why love, trust and holding is a prerequisite for healing the existence is rather wellknown from modern holistic medical theory, like the work of Aaron Antonovsky (1923-1994) (28,29) and our own theoretical and clinical work on holistic healing (2-6). The common understanding of these theories is that the process of getting well again, often called salutogenesis with a concept introduced by Antonovsky, is the exactly opposite process of the process that made you sick, normally called pathogenesis. What made you sick, according to most holistic medical thinking was repressing negative emotions, which was unbearable in the moment, because of lack of holding and support, so therefore what is needed for healing is the love, care, support and holding, which was missing in the traumatic moment(s). So creating this space of trust and unconditional love allows the patient to go back to the emotionally painful moments and heal. In our own clinic we have recently seen patients with even severe illnesses like tinnitus, chronic pain and cancer benefit from the simple process of getting support for existential healing, suggesting that love still today is the best medicine. (31,32)

## Discussion

There are more than 70 manuscripts assigned to the Hippocratic collection (1) and historians have been eagerly occupied with the question of their origin. Was it the historical Hippocrates in person or his later students, who did the works? Reading the collection,

the difference in quality is clear, but nobody can doubt that all the works are closely connected to the thinking of Hippocrates and that they contain and express the original thinking and the knowledge of Hippocrates, his students and the grand medical tradition he founded, which has lasted fairly unbroken until our modern time. Jones speculated that the Corpus Hippocraticum, as the collection has been called, is the remains of a library of the Hippocratic school of Cos (1). In our work the historical person is much less interesting than the whole medical tradition Hippocrates founded and as the Corpus Hippocraticum has been studied by most of the great physicians for the last 2,300 years, we attribute full validity to the writings.

With the beginning of the 1900 modern science and culture arose and the Hippocratic tradition was rejected and substituted with a completely new medical science based on the natural sciences, especially the biochemistry that exploded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or in other words the biomedicine we have today. We have kept many of the ethical principles of the original medical oath in the present day medical tradition, like promising not to seduce our patients and not to do harm before anything else, but most of the oath has become meaningless and archaic.

The fundamental reason for the Hippocratic ethics, which was to be able to interact with the patient to bring him into the state of healing (2) has been almost completely lost.

The great Hippocratic art of holistic healing, which basically seems to be about working with the personality and consciousness of the patients, rehabilitating their spiritual, mental, emotional, physical and sexual character, has been lost as our medical tradition, but thanks to the Corpus Hippocraticum not forgotten.

## Conclusion

The reason for the Hippocratic ethics was extremely practical. Only when the physician came from his heart, with good intention (3-5) and skilfully meeting the patient with deep compassion and willingness to give support and holding (6), could the patient be healed.

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