
Hippocrates' Oath

(Translated by Amelia Arenas)

—for Gary Lefer

I SWEAR BEFORE my gods, my ancestors, my teachers, my fellow healers and apprentices, and by all the arts and knowledge I was privileged to learn, that I will stand by these words:

I will love those who taught me these arts as I love my parents and I will offer my skills to the young with the same generosity that they were given to me. And I will never ask them for gold, but demand that they stand by this covenant in return. I also swear that if I earn fame and wealth, I will share it with my masters and my students.

I will soothe the pain of anyone who needs my art, and if I don't know how, I will seek the counsel of my teachers.

I will offer those who suffer all my attention, my science and my love. Never will I betray them or risk their well-being to satisfy my vanity. I will not hurt my fellow or put a knife to his flesh if I don't know how, or give him an herb to soothe his pain, even if he begs for it in anguish, if it might take away his breath.

I will never harm my suffering friend, because life is sacred, from the tender fruit that he once was in his mother's womb to that first sigh he gave out between her legs when he opened his eyes to the world.

I will try to understand his sorrows but his secrets will never leave my ears. Under no circumstance I will use his body to advance my knowledge or my fame, unless in his last moment, he or his widow give me his corpse, so that his death may help me understand how to soothe another's pain.

I pray that the attention I give to those who put themselves in my hands be rewarded with happiness. And in honor of

the knowledge I've received from my teachers, I swear to care for anyone who suffers, prince or slave.

If I ever break this oath, let my gods take away my knowledge of this art and my own health.

Here speaks a citizen, a servant of people. May I be destroyed if I betray these words.

NOTE

No one knows who Hippocrates was. We can only say that he was an Attic citizen, born on the island of Cos sometime between the fourth and fifth century BC, in all likelihood not an aristocrat, but the heir of well-to-do merchants or artisans. On account of the extraordinary circumstances of his time—circumstances that have been amply, but never fully, explained and which stirred Greek society and influenced western values to this day—his work is the fruit of democracy, for Hippocrates professionalized a craft. He turned the antics of traditional healers into the art of medicine, just as Socrates' followers invented the concept of school, the tragedians of Aeschylus' age turned primitive rituals into theater, and the teachers of Iktinus made architecture out of the construction business.

The original version of the Hippocratic Oath is a text written in all likelihood by a follower or a learned scribe, apparently from Pythagoras' school. Ever since it was composed, students of medicine have sworn to some version of it, freely re-fashioned over the centuries to fit the convictions of the time, ranging from pale, legalistic texts to Maimonides' prayer, a Jewish text composed in Spanish Cordoba in the twelfth century—arguably the most poetic one.

The key controversial aspects of Hippocrates' Oath have been its explicit injunctions against euthanasia, abortion, and surgery, all of which have been cautiously reworked in later versions of the text. It bears remembering that his words against administering a deadly medicine to a patient, "even if asked in extreme pain," have to be read in the context of the often fatal effects of ancient sedatives and anesthetics; that abortion was performed almost exclusively on adulteresses and prostitutes and thus imposed upon women by men; and that surgery was not yet integrated into the physician's craft, a practice performed at great risk to the patient by barbers and leather-workers.

A mix of stern civic ethics and inspired humanitarianism, Hippocrates' text has endured to this day, not just by virtue of its literary merits, but because it is the first definition of the medical profession, a covenant for teachers, colleagues, and students of the healing arts.

That is why the document has been rewritten and read out loud for centuries and why it is revisited now.