

Hippocrates or Hypocrite

Most doctors have taken an oath not to commit abortion or euthanasia.

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“I will give no deadly drug to any, though it be asked of me, nor will I counsel such, and especially I will not aid a woman to procure abortion.” These are words from the Hippocratic Oath, a solemn promise made by physicians upon entering their profession.

For centuries—including the one just ended—medical doctors have been required to take this oath before practicing medicine, and it is still part of many med school graduation exercises. When taking the Hippocratic Oath, doctors vow not to commit euthanasia, even if the patient requests it. They also vow not to do abortions. This oath has become something of an embarrassment in the post-Roe vs. Wade era.

Killing unborn children and killing sick people used to be considered horrible, monstrous crimes, about the worst thing that a physician could do. Now, abortion has become legal and euthanasia has become a progressive cause.

In response, many medical schools have dropped the oath or censored out the pro-life parts. New codes of medical ethics are being put forward, reflecting today's moral relativism. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Dr. Kevorkian and a good number of the doctors in the abortion mills are routinely, among their other transgressions, violating their Hippocratic Oath.

Hippocrates, who lived in the fifth century before Christ, was among the Greek physicians who turned the practice of medicine away from magic toward objective science. At a time when many who claimed to heal diseases were little more than witchdoctors or scam artists, Hippocrates turned medicine into a learned profession, with high standards for education and ethics.

After an invocation of the gods and a section on professional relationships with colleagues (which is the source of quirks of the physician subculture, such as not charging each other fees), the oath goes on to set forth a remarkable summation of medical ethics:

“The regimen I adopt shall be for the benefit of my patients according to my ability and judgment, and not for their hurt or for any wrong. I will give no deadly drug to any, though it be asked of me, nor will I counsel such, and especially I will not aid a woman to procure abortion. Whatsoever house I enter, there will I go for the benefit of the sick, refraining from all wrongdoing or corruption, and especially from any act of seduction, of male or female, of bond

or free. Whatsoever things I see or hear concerning the life of men, in my attendance on the sick or even apart therefrom, which ought not to be noised abroad, I will keep silence thereon, counting such things to be as sacred secrets” (text from the Encyclopedia Britannica).

Not only does the oath address euthanasia and abortion, it forbids sexual immorality with patients and insists on the privacy of medical information—all hot issues today.

Compare this with the language of today's American Medical Association's Code of Ethics: “The AMA's Code of Ethics today is a constantly evolving document that serves as a contract between physicians and their patients. Responding to current trends, the code is developing new boundaries for the business of medicine.”

For Hippocrates, medicine is a lofty, honor-bound profession; for today's AMA, medicine is reduced to a “business.” Medical ethics is described in terms of a legal “contract,” and the long lists of guidelines the Code goes on to enumerate follow the language of bureaucratic regulation—in stark contrast to the succinct eloquence of the Hippocratic Oath.

But the real difference is that Hippocrates thinks about professional issues in terms of moral absolutes, while the AMA Code is at the mercy of “current trends,” so that it is “constantly evolving.”

The Hippocratic Oath cannot be dismissed as a relic of an ancient culture. In fact, the culture of ancient Greece was quite tolerant not only of abortion (which is by no means just a modern procedure) but also of the infanticide of unwanted children. Hippocrates, like other great moral teachers, was countercultural.

When Christianity came to the ancient world some 500 years later, the Oath was retained by Christian physicians, who replaced its references to the mythological gods with the Triune God of Scripture. As Michael J. Gorman has shown in his book *Abortion and the Early Church*, the early Christians worked hard to dismantle the anti-life practices of the pagan Greeks and Romans. Hippocrates proved a valuable ally.

Many—maybe most—doctors remain queasy about abortion, often accepting it in principle but refusing to do it themselves and looking down on their colleagues who do. And a good number of physicians are resisting the euthanasia bandwagon. The Hippocratic tradition shaped the practice of medicine for some 2,500 years. And despite *Roe vs. Wade*, it continues to loom in the guilty conscience of the medical profession.