Hippocratic Oath, 21st Century

Anand Kumar

Received: 28 February 2009 / Accepted: 8 March 2009
© Association of Surgeons of India 2010

Abstract Hippocratic Oath was first promulgated in 400 BC. Since then it became mandatory to take this oath for any medical professional who practices medicine. The Oath envisaged all the important guidelines required to be possessed before the medicine is practiced. Recently there had been debates over the traditional oath and various revisionist versions were recommended. The enormous available literature compels us to think and revisit the status of original oath vis a vis the practice of medicine in 21st Century.

This theme is a part of Dr. KL Wig Oration of National Academy of Medical Sciences, delivered at Ahmedabad in December 2005.

Keywords Hippocratic Oath · 21st century

The practice of medicine is directed and linked with “Hippocrates” traditionally known as “Father of Medicine”. “Hippocratic oath in 21st Century needs to be thought of, analyzed by all of us towards the current scenario of practice of medicine and medical education, keeping in mind the right we as health and education providers are bestowed upon by the society. The current literature on the subject is in abundance and demands to re-look the Hippocratic oath promulgated in the 4th century BC. To highlight a few of them are:

- The Hippocratic oath and contemporary medicine: Dialectic between past ideals and present reality [1]
- Whatever happened to Hippocrates [2]
- Bioethics activities in India [3]
- Treatment at random: The ultimate science or the betrayal of Hippocrates [4]
- The oath of Hippocrates: An historical review [5]
- Bioethics and Hippocrates [6]
- Oath, codes, ethics and essence of medicine: A time for resurrection [7]
- Hippocrates and medicine in 3rd millennium.

The original oath considered medicine to be science and proclaimed the oath and it was based on

- Sense of responsibility towards patients
- Keep profession and self holy and upright
- Professional confidentiality
- Human dignity and religious responsibility.

The oath speaks about earliest codes of ethics and denounces that a physician should ceremoniously recite this, addressing to all faiths as a part of their fulfillment of the profession. Hippocrates laid down the criteria for a perfect physician as observant, humane, learned, orderly and calm, thoughtful, purity of mind and ability to gain more knowledge for its application. The original oath encompasses:

God fearing and swearing in front of deity: I swear by Apollo the physician and aesculapius, all the Gods and

A. Kumar
Department of General Surgery,
Institute of Medical Sciences, Banaras Hindu University,
Varanasi, India

E-mail: profanandkumar52@gmail.com

Goddesses that according to my ability and judgment I will keep this oath and stipulation.

Respect to teachers and his/her family without any financial or materialistic gain/dissipation of knowledge to students: To reckon him who taught me this art equally dear to me as my parents, to share my substance with him and relieve his necessities if required, (a) To look upon his offspring in the same footing as my own brothers and sisters (b) teach them this art, if they shall wish to teach it without fee or stipulation and that by precept, lecture and every other mode of instruction (c) I will impart a knowledge of the art to my own sons and those of my teachers and to disciples bound by a stipulation and oath according to the law of medicine, but to none others.

Proficiency and deviate from evils: I will follow that system of regimen which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patients. Abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous, will give no deadly medicine to any one if asked nor suggest any such counsel and will not give to a woman a pessary to produce abortion.

Dedication and honesty for the benefits of sick: With purity and with holiness I will pass my life and practice my art, into whatever house I enter, I will go in to them for benefit of the sick, will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption and from the seduction of females or males of freeman and slaves.

Confidentiality: Whatever in connection with my professional practice or not, the connection with it, I see or hear in the life of men which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge as reckoning that all such should be kept secret.

Live with dignity and respect: While I continue to keep this oath unviolated, may it granted to me to enjoy life and practice of art respected by all men in all times.

But should I tress pass and violate this oath, may the reverse be my lot (punishment otherwise). The oath proclaimed by Hippocrates was in true since Hippocratic in its application in the interest of patient care. It reflected high ideals. Modern medicine is based on assumptions made by Hippocrates that a well trained physician can cure illness with knowledge gained from medical writings or experience. Unfortunately in the wake of current modern clinical practice and technology, the once revered Hippocratic oath is being increasingly seen as hindrances owing to certain philosophy or excuses (rationale/Irrational) and most doctors do not find it inspirational. There exists two faces of a coin which one, one should believe and to my mind both are right hence it is absolutely illogical to say that Hippocratic oath is not inspirational.

Let me visualize the current views about it. In 1973 US Supreme Court rejected the oath as a guide to medical ethics and practice by stating that the oath is incapable of covering the latest developments and methods of medical practice and research. In 1981 Dr. Ulrich Wolff an East German

physician wrote “Farewell to Hippocrates”. Probably what we are facing today is the resultant of modernization of oath. I quote “of all the arts medicine is the most noble but owing to its ignorance at present is far behind” and unquote “Is it the core of current oath”.

Again I quote “Physicians are many in title but very few in reality” and unquote that “Such persons because of their physical appearance are as actors but not actors in true sense”. The required criteria for the desired output and competent knowledge of medicine to all the professionals are questionable and responsible for mistakes in medicine. With the growth of medicine, changing world and scenario there had been changing oaths namely modern oath, American oath, Geneva oath etc. Also exact wording of the original oath has long been subject to dispute. This has been because of modernization of oath for more civilized medical profession in 21st century, change in language, social mores (advanced and so-called cultured society), genetic research and practice of abortion and euthanasia.

It is proclaimed now that we require changing Hippocratic ideals. But ideals will remain ideals. It is language/literal meaning which has been twisted from time to time. The critique of Hippocratic oath reasoned and outlined its shortcomings in the statement that there is absence of ethical augmentation (since the oath was based on predetermined conclusion without any reasoning hence not conducive to present day medicine in 21st century). Further it lacks incorporation of laws and regulations as well as loss of power of autonomy.

All above reasons in true sense may look appropriate but too much of autonomy leaves no binding on professionals and it becomes a powered vehicle without a brake and hence there is every probability of meeting out an accident. Currently because of rationing of medical resources and limitations it may be logical to talk about autonomy with reference to certain situation like for terminally ill patients with vegetative life and AIDS which has lead to introduction of bioethics.

The proponents of bioethics say that Hippocratic oath may deem outdated and out of context in most scenario. But this is incorrect. John Patrick quotes:

“Objectives of Hippocratic oath are theological and philosophical rather than historical” In a true sense it ascertains sense of dignity to human value and offers spiritual duty towards performance of the medical profession. The code of ethics should not be overestimated or undervalued. Even then:

- Very few take oath
- Some take the revisionist version which retains the name but remove the contents
- Many make no commitments to rigorously defined ethical standards
- Bioethics argue and say it is irrelevant
- Existent number of oaths and none of them contains essential features of Hippocratic oath

- Name of Hippocrates is being retained in order to make the public comfortable but the reality has been removed.

Changing oath in changing scenario and its repercussions: Education has been considered sacred and it is said that sacred things are to be imparted only to sacred persons. It is unlawful to impart them to the profane until they have been initiated in to the mysteries of science. Also it is important that the criteria for acquisition of a competent knowledge needs to be fulfilled which incorporates a natural predisposition, instructions, love of profession and perseverance, leisure, natural talent and acceptance of instructions.

The traditional and modern oath needs to be compared at this juncture to analyze the outcome of the present practice of medicine.

The original oath	Modern Oath
1. Swear by all Gods and Goddess	Swear in presence of almighty whatsoever, before my family, teachers and my peer
2. Theme on teaching and imparting skills without fees	Word without fee is deleted and the current scenario is obvious. No admission without money, tuition and coaching in medicine. Charging fees from everyone – kills the basic instinct of oath
3. With purity and holiness	Legalization of abortion has misused this law which was not existent. Word beneficence has been added
5. Maintenance of confidentiality	Instigation towards CPA by the colleagues.

AMA version of oath: This speaks about loyalty of profession, generosity to all its members, lead the life and practice art in uprightness and honor, holding oneself far aloof from wrong, corruption and temptations. It also states that one will give no drugs, perform no operation for a criminal purpose even if solicited and maintenance of secrecy. But what is happening is very obvious. The theme is “Do not harm” which is a promise in medicine. Even then nearly 100,000 Americans die every year from medical errors and thousands more are injured and disabled. This equals the number of deaths from breast cancer, trauma and AIDS together. A report prepared for state policy matter in Massachusetts noted that risk of dying being a patient was 200 times greater than risk of dying in vehicular accident, and 2000 times greater than the risk of being injured while working in a chemical plant or flying in an airplane. Pentagon sources quote “Number of people

who die each year from preventable medical mistakes in hospital is more than the number of Americans who died in the Korean and Vietnam wars combined. Health care industry and Medical Profession does not take preventable deaths and injuries from medical errors seriously. In 21st century the US plans to spend US \$ 1.5 trillion a year on health care. Despite Hippocrates doctrine “PRIMUM NON NOCERE” (Above all do not harm) operations have been performed on wrong patients, wrong sides, wrong parts and worst of all the wrong medications. With the advancements in medicine the physicians have gradually lost the sense of their profession.

Putting a human face on medical mistakes can increase the pressure to do something about them. After all why?? Having realized the medical mistakes, the medical negligence act was introduced in 1986 which is again being exploited by colleagues.

- Deaths and injuries occur from errors by the care provided
- Professionals get paid for poorly performed procedures and unaccountable for errors.

Regarding medical mistakes it is said that “It happened to me it could happen to you It happens to the old and young the rich and poor the educated and uneducated”.

And this highlights peculiar characteristics of our health care systems. Is it not that we are deviating from our path, by condemning the Hippocratic Oath and proclaiming modern oath and then to accept bioethics? The medical care system is being quoted as “So much good but not good enough”. Health care to sick is now being referred as business. Walt Whitman stated that if anything is sacred, it is human body. Is it not that we are trying to change our values and morals which were existent in its purest form when Hippocratic oath was written? This hypocrisy on Hippocratic oath is not tenable. Contrary to this Albert Einstein once said “We can not solve problems by using same kind of thinking we used when we created them”. Hence application of new skills and knowledge is essential in health care organization for the utmost safety. During Hippocratic era – errors pertained to physician rather than to system. In Bioethical era this is attributed to the system because of complexity and the reasons are lack of technical skills, knowledge and experience, over confidence, desire to build a public reputation, miscued diagnosis, mistakes during treatment, medication mistakes, inadequate postoperative care and mistaken identity. Poor care to patients or unethical practices by peer to ensure quality care is common. Peer review is a self regulating function in which physician evaluate their colleagues and hold them accountable, a distinguished feature of profession. This has been probably because of induction of word beneficence and too much of autonomy in professional ethics and modern oath. This sad state of medical error referred as “Medical Enron” is indicative of the arrogance of the medical priesthood and a physician with self references is a dangerous physician.

Changing scenario (Oath and its implication)

Hippocratic Oath stood for

Transcendence: “Dismiss it as a vestigial marker of cultural superstitions in worthy of a scientific age”. The medicine today is described in the categories of biology/physiology and sociology. The bio-psychosocial model is missing. The model at present denies the spiritual value. The significance of invocation of the God in the oath of Hippocrates can not be over estimated. Those who deny the existence of objective truth and say that we create our own values have no basis for collegial law of medical ethics.

Oath and Codes: The code is a rationalistic document without the invocation of transcendence. The oath involved transcendence. It maintains relationship between patients and physicians which are being abused. The Sydenheim quotes “It is only submission to God and God’s truth which protects patients. A physician is only required to display appropriate attitudes to pass in the modern medical school. Unfortunately current evaluation of medical students concern itself with their attitudes rather than their character which remains warranty of life. Currently changing the oath to code and cachets is like turning ten commandants to ten guidelines.

Trust: There is rapid decline in levels of trust which was non-existent in Hippocratic oath where predictable character of high ethical standards were laid down. The reasons are loss of character, progressive commercialization of medicine and truth denying character. This is becoming the ethos of the whole society. Hippocratic oath provided a vision of the medical commits with a predictable character of high ethical standards with justifiable trust between physicians and patient with all therapeutic benefits.

Repercussion of changed oath: Changed oath refers not to a good life but to a good reputation. In spite of an increase in number of medical graduates who swear the oath there has been decrease in the inclusion of content items found in classical Hippocratic oath. All still pledge a commitment to patients, only 43% vow to be accountable for their actions. Fourteen percent include a prohibition toward euthanasia, 11% invoke a deity, 8% swear for not inducing abortions and only 3% retain a proscription against sexual contact with patients.

We really should not embrace Hippocrates with pity if we are misquoting him by exclusion.

The assault on medical ethics is growing because of bioethics movement. It is moving us from Hippocratic type of “do no harm” medicine to “quality-of-life and duty to die”. Bioethics movement has basically discarded the Hippocratic oath because they think it is paternalistic. Such a change in attitude has led to medico legal issues. Also this has led to increasing commercialization of higher education. Those

who can afford can buy medical education without set standards. Capitation fee is against the very code of Ethics of medicine, which Hippocrates had laid down. In the bio-ethical era the importance of human life has changed to biological life. This transition has certainly changed the values of standard of medicine.

The UN declaration of human rights and dignity of the human being states that “Parties to this convention shall protect the integrity, dignity and identity of all human beings without discrimination, respect for their rights, fundamental freedom and respect for private life to everyone. The unethical act is a violation of human rights and disrespect for the principles expressed in Hippocratic oath.

Ethics and impact of modernization on ethics and Hippocratic ideals in medicine: Ethics is the study of human

action whether being right or wrong. It studies voluntary action with a particular interest in the moral character of voluntary action. Ask what we should or should not do where it will affect another person. It makes systematic study of our moral ideals and goals. It is based on reflective analysis of moral experience. We have professional ethics which is the code that regulates action and sets standard for the members. It attempts to assure high standards of competence, the relationship among its members and promotes the welfare of the whole community.

Hippocrates pledged the medical profession to the preservation of life and the service to humanity. Advances in modern technology have raised ethical issues of profound significance. With the indiscriminate and irrational application of technologies, we run the risk of damaging the most prized medical profession and one of these applications is sex determination. Such act needs critical analysis of thoughts embodied in Hippocratic oath. The community holds doctors in awe and counsellor as “Gods in white Coat”. Doctors are expected to adhere strongly to medical ethics. The resultant situation of medical profession from Hippocrates i.e. 440 BC to 21st century is:

- For over 2000 years Hippocratic oath governed the practice of medicine
- It is being told to cast Hippocratic oath aside or overthrow the centuries of medical tradition. This should not be taken lightly. The oath embodies the values and not the practice only. The practice should entail a commitment to some moral order.

The oath addresses 3 planes of relationship and to each is sworn as oath of duty.

- a) Physician and his God
- b) Physician and his teacher
- c) Physician and his patient

It is noteworthy that the physician’s duty to his patient is marked out primarily by a series of negatives rather than positives (Positive is open to interpretations and modifications). The practice of medicine and Hippocratic values are

inseparable religiously as well as philosophically in spite of diverse cultural environment. The Practice of art of medicine is now of technicians. Summarizing the statues of oath today, the medical profession promotes knowledge without humanity and generates monsters. Humanity without knowledge can cause damage. Decision making is difficult. Being lay is not an offence. Being religious is not a merit. What accounts are the feelings with which the medical art is practiced irrespective of caste and creed? The conversion of health unit in to business is not a value. Professional ethics is a value. The ethical nature of medicine is a value.

Resource optimization is an aim, a method and a technique but not a value. The relationship between money and health is certainly a controversial point. Let us think today, in a dawning society that is growing old with few values and little certainty. Let we should not forget Hippocrates who has laid down the norms of profession and stay on with this and follow the oath and practice medicine.

References

1. Jotterand F (2005) The Hippocratic oath and contemporary medicine: dialectic between past ideals and present reality, *J Med Philos* 30(1):107–128
2. Simonsen R (2001) Whatever happened to Hippocrates, *Gen Dent*. 49(3):232–234
3. Kumar NK (2006) Bioethics activities in India , *East Mediterr Health J, Suppl* (1):S56–S65
4. Retsas S (2004) Treatment at random: The ultimate science or the betrayal of Hippocrates, *J Clin Oncol* 15:22(24), 5005–5008
5. Davey LM (2001) The oath of Hippocrates: An historical review, *Neurosurgery* 49(3):544–66
6. Kepocsi E, Jenei I (2003) Bioethics and Hippocrates, *Orv Hetil*, 144(29):1447–1453
7. Singh M (1997) Oath, codes, ethics and essence of medicine: a time for resurrection *Natl Med J India* 10(4):190–193
8. Hippocrates and medicine in 3rd millennium, Augustine college papers, Hellidonis Ei, 2001