



Abortion Rights
Coalition of Canada

Coalition pour le droit à
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Abortion and the Hippocratic Oath

The Canadian anti-abortion movement periodically calls for the revival of the use of the Hippocratic Oath by the medical profession. In May of 1999, two hundred anti-choice activists picketed the headquarters of the Canadian Medical Association in Ottawa, demanding that the CMA reinstate the Oath. According to protest leader Dr. André Lafrance, after the CMA stopped using the Oath in the late 1960s, it moved from an ethic of protection of human life to one which "increasingly condones killing by doctors"¹ The group insists the Hippocratic Oath prohibits abortion. As the following arguments will show, however, this belief is based on a narrow and historically inaccurate understanding of the Hippocratic Oath.

What is the Hippocratic Oath?

The answer is not obvious. Hippocrates (c. 460-377 BC) is called the "father of Greek medicine" but little is known about his life and work. Some 50 to 70 books, most of them likely written during the fourth and fifth centuries BC, make up the Hippocratic corpus. These works were produced by many different authors, and few were written by the historical Hippocrates. The Oath was certainly not invented by him. According to modern historians, it was probably written between the third and fifth centuries BC by a Pythagorean temple cult that worshipped Apollo. Nor was it always "the" Oath, for other medical oaths, promises, and prayers were important during the medieval and early modern periods, including Jewish ones.² The Hippocratic Oath rose to prominence only at the end of the fifteenth century. Even then, there were different versions of the Oath, some based on mistranslations of the original Greek text. Other modifications were deliberate; translators changed the ancient text because Hippocrates was a revered source lending authority to their personal belief system.³ This use of the Hippocratic Oath continues.

¹ *BC Catholic*, May 24, 1999, "200 demand return of Hippocratic oath."

² Stanley M. Aronson and Betty E. Aronson, "In the Sufferer Let Me See Only the Human: A Brief Look at Some Jewish and Non-Jewish Medical Oaths," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 13, 2, 2000, 285-96.

³ Thomas Rütten, "Receptions of the Hippocratic Oath in the Renaissance," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 51, 4, 1996, 466.

Does the Oath Prohibit Abortion?

No. The literal translation of the phrase in question is “And likewise I will not give a woman a destructive vaginal tampon.”⁴ Though widely misinterpreted as a blanket injunction against all abortions, the clause prohibits only the use of a drug-soaked tampon (a vaginal suppository or pessary). Perhaps this method of abortion was considered more dangerous to the woman than other methods. Other texts in the Hippocratic corpus discuss abortion as if there were no prohibitions, describing it as something women were “always doing”.⁵ In one section of *Diseases of Women*, a text attributed to Hippocrates, a pregnant slave is advised to jump up and down repeatedly, touching her heels to her buttocks, in order to expel the seed.⁶ A range of abortion methods were routinely used in the ancient world, including herbs, drugs, and physical techniques.

What Else is Contained in the Oath?

The Oath begins by invoking the worship of pagan Gods, naming Aesculapius, Hygiea, and Panacea. Another passage has physicians swear not to practice abdominal surgery, considered a lowly and dangerous practice best left to others in the competitive medical marketplace. These and other examples not mentioned here indicate that the Oath’s content is historically and culturally specific, and should not be literally applied to today’s medical institutions. Some aspects of the Oath remain, however, more relevant today, including the admonition to maintain patient confidentiality, and to refrain from seducing patients.

The Hippocratic Oath in Canada and the United States

The Hippocratic Oath currently has no legal status. It has become a symbolic ritual in which most Canadian medical school graduates no longer participate. Nor is there a version of the Hippocratic Oath promoted by the American Medical Association. Though some individual medical schools continue to adhere to the Oath, it has been revised and modernized to reflect society's evolving values, changing laws, and new medical technologies. A recent study revealed that in 1993 only 8% of medical schools using the Oath included a prohibition of abortion, based on a misunderstanding of the original text, as noted above.⁷ For the most part, the Hippocratic Oath has been replaced by new codes of ethics, such as the Declaration of Geneva, and that of the Canadian Medical Association, which foreground patient care, and include many directives lacking in the ancient Oath. The CMA's code of ethics promotes, for example, lifelong learning, empathetic communication with patients, the right of patients to refuse treatment, prudent use of health care resources, and many other praiseworthy ethics. It is clear that those opposed to legal abortion simply ignore modern ethics and embrace an inaccurate version of the Hippocratic Oath in order to legitimate their particular view of abortion.

⁴ Rütten, 469.

⁵ Nancy Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1994, 22.

⁶ Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, London, Routledge, 1998, 136.

⁷ Robert D. Orr, MD and Norman Pang, MD, "The Use of the Hippocratic Oath: A Review of 20th Century Practice and a Content Analysis of Oaths Administered in Medical Schools in the U.S. and Canada in 1993," *The Journal of Clinical Ethics*, 8, 1997, 377-88.