



Abortion Rights
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Position Paper #71

Abortion and the Hippocratic Oath

The Canadian anti-abortion movement once called for the revival of the use of the Hippocratic Oath by the medical profession. In May 1999, two hundred anti-choice activists picketed the headquarters of the Canadian Medical Association in Ottawa, demanding that the CMA reinstate the Oath.¹ 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"². The group insisted the Hippocratic Oath prohibits abortion.

As the following arguments will show, 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. (We have reproduced an original version at the end of this paper.)

Nor was it always "the" Oath, since other medical oaths, promises, and prayers were important during the medieval and early modern periods, including Jewish ones.³ The Hippocratic Oath rose to prominence only at the end of the 15th century. Even then, different versions of the Oath existed, 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.⁴ This modified use of the Hippocratic Oath continues.

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."⁵ 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”.⁶ 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.⁷ 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?

Historically, 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. That being said, in 2017 the World Health Organization approved an updated version of the Oath (now called a Pledge) for use by physicians worldwide. Along with updates protecting human rights and the medical profession, the new pledge includes: “I will respect the autonomy and dignity of my patient.” It also modifies a very relevant section:

1948: I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception

2017: I will maintain the utmost respect for human life.⁸

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 1993 study revealed that only 8% of medical schools using the Oath included a prohibition of abortion, based on a misunderstanding of the original text, as noted above.⁹

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 foregrounds patient care, and includes 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/outdated version of the Hippocratic Oath in order to legitimate their particular view of abortion.

Original Hippocratic Oath

I swear by Apollo the physician and Aesculapius, and Hygiea, and Panacea, and all the gods and goddesses, that, according to my ability and judgment, I will keep this Oath and this stipulation.

To consider him who taught me this Art as dear to me as my parent, to share my substance with him, and to relieve his necessities if required; to look upon his offspring as equivalent to my own brothers, and to teach them this Art, if they wish to learn it, without fee or stipulation.

And that by precept, lecture, and every other form of instruction, 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.

I will follow that system of regimen which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patients and abstain from whatever is harmful and mischievous.

I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such advice; likewise, I will not give a pessary to a woman to induce abortion.

I will live my life and practice my art with purity and holiness.

I will not cut persons suffering from 'the stone', but will leave this to be done by men who are practitioners of this skill.

Whatever houses I enter, I will enter for the benefit of the sick, and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption, and especially from the seduction of females or males, of free persons or slaves.

Whatever I see or hear in connection with my professional practice or not in the life of men, which should not be made public, I will not divulge, considering that all such knowledge should remain secret.

As long as I continue to keep this Oath inviolate, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of the Art, respected by all men, at all times. But if I should trespass and violate this Oath, may the opposite be my lot.

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- ¹ Arthur, Joyce. Hypocrisy and the Hippocratic Oath. *Humanist in Canada*, Winter 1999/2000, No. 131, Vol.32, #4, pp. 26-28. Republished at: <http://www.prochoiceactionnetwork-canada.org/articles/hippo.shtml>
 - 2 BC Catholic, May 24, 1999. 200 demand return of Hippocratic oath.
 - 3 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*. 2000, 13:2, 285-96.
 - 4 Rütten, Thomas. Receptions of the Hippocratic Oath in the Renaissance. *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 51, 4, 1996, pg 466.
 - 5 Rütten, *ibid*, pg 469.
 - 6 Demand, Nancy. *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 1994, 22.
 - 7 King, Helen. *Hippocrates' Woman*, London, Routledge, 1998, 136.
 - 8 Parsa-Parsi, Ramin Walter. The Revised Declaration of Geneva: A Modern-Day Physician's Pledge. *JAMA*. Nov 28, 2017. 318(20):1971-1972. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2658261>
 - 9 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. *Journal of Clinical Ethics*. 1997, 8:377-88.