EDITORIAL

THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH IN A CHRISTIAN AND PLURALIST SOCIETY: ETHICAL CONTINUITY, THEOLOGICAL TENSION, AND THE CASE FOR A RENEWED PHYSICIAN'S PLEDGE IN ROMANIAN MEDICAL EDUCATION

WHY THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH STILL MATTERS?

Few texts in medical history retain the symbolic force of the Hippocratic Oath. Though brief, ancient, and transmitted through a complex tradition, the Oath endures as the moral emblem of medicine. Its significance extends beyond history: the Oath frames medicine as a practice defined by self-restraint, fidelity to the patient, confidentiality, respect for teachers, and accountability to a broader moral order (1-3). The Hippocratic Oath stands as one of Western medicine's most enduring ethical touchstones.

The Oath also expresses the responsibility assumed by the future physician to use the knowledge received in the service of good, healing, and the alleviation of suffering. It implies awareness of a medical inheritance transmitted across centuries, an inheritance that each new generation of physicians is called not only to receive, but also to preserve, enrich, and transmit further. In this sense, oath-taking functions as a symbolic relay of professional responsibility, linking the physician to the past of medicine while orienting him or her toward the good of future patients.

At the same time, the contemporary use of the Oath requires careful interpretation. The classical text does not begin with a general statement of professional ethics, but with a religious invocation: "*I swear by Apollo the physician, and Asclepius, and Hygeia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses*" (1). This opening reflects the sacred world of Greek antiquity and shows that the original Oath was not a neutral professional code in the modern sense. It was a solemn act framed before pagan divine witnesses. Yet the same text also contains enduring ethical commitments, including loyalty to teachers, confidentiality, restraint in the use of medical power, and the duty to act in the best interests of the sick (2, 3).

The central question is not the ongoing value of the Hippocratic Oath - it remains ethically vital. The issue is whether its original sacred form fits contemporary medical education, especially in societies shaped by Christianity and pluralism. Modern medicine now operates within a secular, pluralist, and legally complex environment that tests the adaptability of ancient norms.

The wide reception of the Hippocratic Oath across different medical cultures also suggests that its deepest message is not merely local or historical. Despite many national, institutional, and religious adaptations, the Oath has continued to express a common expectation: that medical authority must be used for service rather than domination, for healing rather than self-assertion, and for the protection of life rather than its destruction.

While the Hippocratic Oath symbolizes medical identity, its language reflects a

distant cultural past. This article argues for updating tradition: preserving the Oath's essential duties -patient care, confidentiality, professional integrity, restraint, respect for dignity - within a renewed physician's pledge for Romanian medical universities. Ethical continuity, not literal repetition, must be the focus (3, 4).

METHODOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To support this approach, we searched PubMed/MEDLINE, Google Scholar, and institutional sources such as the World Medical Association and the National Library of Medicine. We included Romanian professional and academic documents when available. This search was not exhaustive or systematic. It aimed to find key sources on the historical, ethical, theological, and institutional sides of the topic. Search terms included phrases such as "Hippocratic Oath," "medical oath," "Declaration of Geneva," "medical professionalism," "Christianity and medicine," "Orthodox bioethics," "oath-taking," "conscience," and "medical education." Other sources were found by tracking references in relevant articles.

Particular attention was given to sources showing how medical oath-taking has been adapted in different cultural and religious contexts, including Christianized versions of the Hippocratic Oath, interfaith discussions of medical pledges, and modern declarations that remove ancient pagan invocations.

The selected literature included: original or authoritative translations of the classical Hippocratic Oath; historical and bioethical analyses of the oath and its reception; studies and commentaries on modern medical oaths and professional pledges; documents concerning the Declaration of Geneva and the Physician's Pledge; and theological or bioethical works addressing Christian conscience, oath-taking, and the moral meaning of medicine. Articles were considered relevant when they helped clarify one of the central questions of this paper: the ethical continuity of the Hippocratic tradition, the religious form of the classical oath, the Christian reception of ancient medical ethics, or the contemporary institutional role of solemn professional pledges.

DOES MEDICINE STILL NEED MORAL RITUALS OF ENTRY INTO THE PROFESSION?

At first glance, the answer is uncertain. Contemporary medical practice is already regulated by law, professional codes, licensing bodies, hospital policies, disciplinary procedures, and established principles of biomedical ethics (5, 6).

Yet the ritual of oath-taking persists in medical schools for a reason: it offers what regulations cannot. Laws can mandate behavior, but only a solemn pledge elevates entering the profession beyond compliance. It demarcates the crossing from student to physician - an act of personal and public commitment.

This symbolic dimension is important for professional identity formation. Medical education not only transmits scientific knowledge and clinical skills, but also fosters critical thinking and professionalism. It also shapes how future physicians understand themselves, their duties, and their relationships with patients. The literature on professional identity formation emphasizes that becoming a physician involves the gradual internalization of professional values rather than mere external compliance with rules (7). In this context, a public pledge can function as a moment of moral orientation.

The widespread use of oaths in contemporary medical ceremonies also shows that modern medicine has not entirely aban-

doned ritual language. Studies of oath-taking in North American medical schools found that many institutions use modified Hippocratic oaths, school-specific pledges, or other professional formulations rather than the classical text in its original form (8, 9). Similar discussions of medical oaths and declarations show that modern formulations increasingly seek to express professional duties in language appropriate to contemporary ethical frameworks (10). This practice suggests that the need for solemn entry rituals persists, even when the exact wording changes. Medical schools continue to seek a language capable of connecting professional knowledge with moral responsibility.

ETHICAL CONTINUITY AND THEOLOGICAL TENSION IN THE CLASSICAL HIPPOCRATIC OATH

The Hippocratic Oath defines medicine as a discipline undergirded by moral boundaries. Physicians are not merely carriers of knowledge; they are morally bound actors, disciplined by obligation, not entitlement (1-3).

Several elements of the Oath remain important for contemporary medical ethics. The physician promises to use treatment for the benefit of the sick, according to ability and judgment, and to avoid harm and injustice. The Oath does not speak in the present language of patient autonomy, informed consent, human rights, or institutional accountability. Nevertheless, it contains moral intuitions that remain central to medical professionalism: the vulnerability of the patient, the asymmetry between patient and physician, the need for trust, and the danger that medical knowledge can be misused.

This ethical value should be acknowledged before any theological observation is made. The problem with the classical Oath is not that it is morally empty or historically irrelevant. On the contrary, its lasting influence comes from the fact that it placed medical practice under moral limits long before modern professional codes were developed. For this reason, a serious discussion of the Oath should avoid two extremes. One extreme is to treat the text as untouchable and to assume that fidelity to the Hippocratic tradition requires literal repetition. The other is to dismiss the Oath simply because it belongs to a pre-Christian and pre-modern world. Neither position is sufficient.

The difficulty lies in the text's original sacred form. The classical Oath begins with the words: "*I swear by Apollo the physician, and Asclepius, and Hygeia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses*". It shows that the Oath was framed as a solemn act before divine witnesses belonging to the religious world of Greek antiquity. In a contemporary Christian and pluralist context, however, the same wording creates a real problem when used not as a historical quotation but as a formula to be pronounced by graduates.

From a Christian perspective, oath-taking is not a mere ceremony. A solemn oath carries truth, conscience, and accountability before God or what the speaker deems ultimately binding. New Testament passages like Matthew 5: 34–37 and James 5: 12 have long warned Christians about oath-taking, though interpretations vary. The problem intensifies when the oath names pagan deities. While a Christian physician may study such texts historically, repeating the words as a personal pledge raises distinct and serious religious concerns. Similar concerns have been discussed in relation to the reception of the Hippocratic Oath across different religious traditions, showing that medical pledge-taking cannot be entirely separated from questions of conscience and faith (11). The distinction between studying and swearing is crucial.

CHRISTIAN RECEPTION AND WESTERN REVISIONS OF MEDICAL OATH-TAKING

Christianity did not simply reject the Hippocratic tradition. Rather, it received many of its ethical intuitions and reinterpreted them within a different theological horizon. The seriousness of care for life, restraint, confidentiality, chastity, faithfulness, and healing fits Christian beliefs about serving the vulnerable. The Hippocratic tradition was not abolished but deeply received.

The Christian difficulty with the classical Hippocratic Oath is not a superficial discomfort with ancient terminology, but a deeper concern regarding the nature of oath-taking itself. In Christian understanding, words pronounced solemnly are not morally neutral. They involve the integrity of the person, the truthfulness of conscience, and accountability before God. Therefore, the invocation of Apollo, Asclepius, Hygeia, Panacea, and "all the gods and goddesses" cannot be reduced entirely to a historical ornament when the text is used as a living pledge. It may be read, taught, and interpreted as a foundational document of medical ethics, but to pronounce it as one's own oath is a different act. The distinction is decisive: historical study does not imply spiritual assent, whereas oath-taking involves personal moral participation. A Christian reception of the Hippocratic tradition must consequently preserve what is ethically true in it – the restraint of medical power, fidelity to the patient, confidentiality, refusal of harm, and reverence for life – while refusing to bind the physician's conscience to a sacred form that belongs to a religious world incompatible with Christian faith.

This distinction helps explain why Christian tradition could preserve the ethical substance of the Hippocratic inheritance while modifying its sacred form. The existence of Christianized versions of the Hippocratic Oath shows that the problem was not the text's moral ethos, but the religious framework in which that ethos was originally expressed. The movement from pagan invocation to Christian reception illustrates a broader pattern in Christian engagement with classical culture: what is true, noble, and ethically sound may be received, but not without discernment (4, 12).

Modern Western medicine has followed a different, though related, path. Instead of preserving the classical oath in its original wording, many medical schools and professional organizations have adopted revised oaths, local pledges, or secular professional declarations. The Declaration of Geneva, first adopted by the World Medical Association in 1948 and subsequently revised, is the most influential example of this process. It has been interpreted as a modern physician's pledge that preserves the professional seriousness of oath-taking while translating the Hippocratic inheritance into a contemporary ethical framework. It retains the solemn character of a professional commitment while avoiding pagan invocation and incorporating ethical concerns that are central to contemporary medicine, including human dignity, non-discrimination, patient autonomy, confidentiality, respect for human life, and the well-being of the physician (13-15).

These developments show that revising medical oath-taking is not a rejection of the Hippocratic tradition. It is a form of ethical translation. The enduring value of the Hippocratic inheritance does not require the literal preservation of every ancient formula. Rather, it requires that each generation ask how the moral gravity of medicine can be expressed truthfully within its own historical, cultural, and spiritual context. For Romanian medical education, this question is especially relevant because the university is a public academic institution, while the

cultural memory of medicine remains shaped, at least in part, by Orthodox Christian conscience.

ROMANIAN MEDICAL EDUCATION: WHY DOES THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH PERSIST AND WHAT SHOULD BE RENEWED?

The continued presence of the Hippocratic Oath in Romanian medical education should not be interpreted primarily as a deliberate theological position. More plausibly, it reflects institutional continuity, symbolic prestige, and the persistence of a ceremonial language associated with the dignity of the medical profession. For generations, the Oath has functioned as a recognizable marker of entry into medicine, often invoked as a noble tradition rather than examined as a text with specific historical and religious content. Precisely because it is treated ceremonially, its opening invocation of pagan deities may go unnoticed, be minimized, or be perceived as a harmless remnant of antiquity.

Romania, however, represents a particular cultural and institutional context. Medical universities are public academic institutions and must function within a pluralist framework, yet Romanian culture remains historically shaped by Orthodox Christianity. This does not mean that medical education should become confessional, nor that the Hippocratic inheritance should be rejected. It means that a solemn professional formula used in Romanian universities should not place graduates in an avoidable situation of ambiguity between inherited academic ritual and Christian conscience. The issue is therefore not a conflict between university and Church, but a question of symbolic coherence, moral seriousness, and respect for the spiritual meaning of oath-taking.

What should be renewed is not the ethical core of the Hippocratic tradition, but the form in which that core is publicly expressed. Romanian medical universities could preserve the solemnity of professional entry while adopting a physician's pledge that avoids pagan invocation and affirms the enduring duties of the medical vocation: service to life, care for the suffering person, confidentiality, competence, compassion, integrity, non-maleficence, and respect for human dignity. Such a pledge would not represent a rupture with Hippocrates, but a responsible continuation of the Hippocratic ethos in a language suitable for contemporary Romanian medical education and unobjectionable to Christian conscience.

TOWARD A RENEWED PHYSICIAN'S PLEDGE

The Hippocratic Oath should remain part of medical history and ethical education, as it continues to express the moral seriousness of medicine: care for the sick, restraint in the use of medical power, confidentiality, professional integrity, and responsibility before a wider moral order.

However, its classical sacred wording cannot be repeated uncritically in contemporary medical education. The invocation of Apollo, Asclepius, Hygeia, Panacea, and "all the gods and goddesses" belongs to the religious world of Greek antiquity and may create a real difficulty of conscience for Christian graduates, especially in a Romanian cultural context shaped by Orthodox Christianity.

The appropriate response is not to reject the Hippocratic inheritance, but to receive it responsibly. Romanian medical universities could preserve the solemnity of professional entry while adopting a renewed physician's pledge that avoids pagan invocation and affirms the enduring duties of the medical vocation: service to life, care for the suffering person, confidentiality, competence, compassion, integ-

rity, non-maleficence, and respect for human dignity. Such a pledge would not be a rupture with Hippocrates, but a faithful continuation of the ethical core of the Hippocratic tradition in a language suitable for contemporary Romanian medical education and unobjectionable to Christian conscience.

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