

Hippocratic Medicine and Philosophy at the End of the 20th Century (2)

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V. Hippocratic Ethics

The word “ethics” is derived from the Greek word “ethos” (=nice character). Ethics is the science of what to do. Codes of behaviour, therefore, are considered essential to a profession and throughout history have been designed to increase respect and prestige. This was certainly the case in the period during which the oath, ascribed to Hippocrates was written. The medical profession was struggling to maintain a profile of respectability and was not held in the same regard as religion, law and philosophy.

Hippocrates considered ethical behaviour the foremost characteristic of a physician. His ethical concepts are described in five books, namely *The Physician*, *The Oath*, *The Law*, *Medical Decorum* and his *Aphorisms*. They explore the ethical attitudes necessary in medicine and underscore the many difficulties inherent in medical practice, namely, the need for self-control, respect toward one’s teacher, caring for the patient, dedication to duty, sincerity and humility, stability, calmness, the collegial spirit, disinterest in wealth, a commitment to the education of the new generation of physicians, confidentiality and reverence toward ethical laws.

In the Western World medical profession is identified with the Hippocratic Oath. The Hippocratic Oath is symbolic of the ethical intentions and requirements of professional life for physicians. Patients and physicians alike, think of the oath as something morally binding on the physician and requiring obligations to the patient.

Hippocratic Oath is considered to be the point of reference of all international medical declarations concerning *medical ethics*. It is the most widely known document associated with his name. It is a *monumental code of ethics* one-page long, about which hundreds of thousands of pages were written around the world. It is the pattern of *deontology of medical profession* throughout the ages. At the end of the 20th century, however, the Hippocratic Oath has been receiving criticisms. The headline ethical issues raised by biotechnology, increased costs, and changing medical and social patterns have been the occasion for looking closely at whatever sources of wisdom might be useful in dealing with newly perceived problems. A typical example is the private and the public dilemmas concerning AIDS. To combat AIDS we should give more emphasis on fundamental principles of human rights and reconsider any public health action in the light of present medical knowledge and social conditions. It must be emphasized that:

1. Hippocratic Oath opposes: (a) abortion (b) castration (c) euthanasia (d) operation of stone-sufferers and finally, (e) the disclosure of professional secrets.
2. Most of the medical ethics still derive from Hippocratic ethical laws and moral principles.
3. Hippocratic Oath was to be taken only by students or young physicians and not by specialists.
4. The text of the Hippocratic Oath contains phrases which are immortal throughout the ages, such as the following: "I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art".

VI. Hippocratic Philosophy

At the end of the 20th century the underestimation of Hippocratic Medicine and philosophy would both philosophy is unfortunate. Medicine and philosophy would both benefit from the development of the philosophy of medicine as a field. For example the philosophy of medicine is an essential foundation for bioethics. It should provide insights into some of the key problems of the philosophy of

science such as the nature of explanation and theoretical evolution, and, ought help to shape the goals as well as the methods used in both experimentation and research in medicine and the health sciences.

Much of our reluctance is due to the inadequacy of misinterpretation of words. We recoil from the phrase “philosophy of medicine” because we tend to identify philosophy with metaphysical speculation! We forget that in the Greek terminology philosophy is the synthesis of knowledge that is the ultimate truth in science, and that among the Greeks to combine the qualities of a physician with those of a philosopher was to raise man to the level of the gods. We recoil from the word “doctrine” because it has come to signify assertion, often unwarranted by facts, though the word is a derivative of *doctus*, i.e., the action of teaching and implies ultimate scientific truth. We reject the word “theory” because we take it as a guiding hypothesis, whereas theory in its original Greek conception is the intuition of the whole truth.

Medical doctrine or general medical theory represents a synthesis of medical knowledge, but the body of that knowledge is, and always has been, growing and altering. It is the object of those who study medicine from the cultural point of view to unravel the doctrine embodied in the work and practice of the great masters of medicine and to present it in intelligence form.

Hippocratic philosophy combined the concepts of Ionian philosophers of the Asia Minor with Pythagoras' and Alkmaion's theory regarding the equilibrium of dissimilar elements and of opposing quantities, thus establishing the humoral theory for human physiology and pathophysiology. According to this theory, human beings are made of soul and body, which contains the four humours: blood, phlegm and black and yellow bile. These humours are in continuous motion through the circulation, which anatomically Hippocrates had not understood. The equilibrium of these humours, (=“*eucrasia*”) is identified with health while disequilibrium, (=“*dyscrasia*”) produces disease. Motion of the humours ensures unity

of the body and soul so that even a small disorder in any part of the body is reflected in the whole. It could, therefore, be supported that health is a state of harmonic mixture (balance) of the humours (eucrasia) and with the same logic disease is a state of faulty mixture (imbalance) of the humours (dyscrasia). Hence, it is obvious that Hippocrates was concerned with the body as a whole, rather than with the lesion of parts. Hippocrates also suggested that an excess of one of the four humours would result in various elements (blood, phlegm, black bile, yellow bile), temperaments (hematic, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic) organs (heart, brain, liver, spleen) and seasons, (spring, summer, autumn, winter).

The theory of humours matches contemporary thinking regarding health and disease. Not long ago it was suggested that medicine must be based on a self-contained, causal system made up of elements placed in time and space and related only through the laws of causality and outcome. On the other hand, the patient perceives the bodily manifestations of diseases, which can be measured, whereas the psychologic and spiritual experiences are subjective and not bound by physical laws. However, the purely biologic thinking that produced the revolutionary developments of the 20th century tends to neglect psychologic factors not only as an epiphenomenon but also as a cause.

The Hippocratic humours theory enriched by the concept of psychosomatic medicine (initially proposed by Plato), is the basis of today's broadly accepted "whole-person" medicine. This framework brings together in a complementary fashion the scientific and philosophical aspects of medicine and validates the unity in which the organism functions as a whole-body and soul. "Man is a unit of body and soul" and "from the soul springs both the good and bad of the body", like the teachings of the great Athenian philosopher Plato, who was one of the most brilliant figures in the history of Western philosophy. His belief that "one cannot learn about the nature of the body without learning the nature of the whole" has a deep meaning; it reveals that Plato, the pupil of Socrates, "was the follower of

Hippocrates” from whom he got his main doctrine.

According to Galen, who is considered the greatest Greek physician after Hippocrates, “the philosophical views of Hippocrates and Plato are the same”. The value of Hippocratic philosophy can be summarized with the Galenic phrase:

“The best physician is also a philosopher”.

It is important to note that it is impossible to understand the history of philosophy without keeping the history of medicine constantly in view and that according to Hippocrates:

“The philosopher physician is equal to the Gods”.

Quality of life (and its variables) which is a term often mentioned recently, is based upon the Hippocratic principle of whole-person medicine (holistic medicine). Professor Katsutaro Nagata—of the Hamamatsu University Medical School—in an excellent article entitled “Psychosomatic medicine: an integrator of Occidental and Oriental Medicine” very correctly emphasizes that whole-person medicine is needed today more than any other previous age, mainly due to the increase of lifestyle diseases.

The underestimation of Hippocratic philosophy and its prophetic messages recalls two very important social questions:

- (a) Where is the *wisdom* we have lost in *medical knowledge*? and
- (b) Where is the *knowledge* we have lost in *scientific information*?

VII. Concluding Remarks

- Medical education shows little interest for medical history.
- Medical profession shows little liking for medical history.
- Modern medicine, however, still can learn from the Hippocratic medicine and philosophy.

Hippocratic medicine is still contemporary and prophetic, synthetic, cosmic, constitutional, holistic, humanistic and artistic, helping the self-healing power of nature to a large extent by appropriate medical treatment. In addition Hippocratic collection became the standard literary medium not only for expounding medicine, philosophy and science generally, but also initially for history.

History of medicine is—and should be—a living science, not only treated as a hobby or an isolated special field, but closely connected with everyday practice. In other words, we must continue to investigate how much the practising physician can learn and use from the historic therapeutical facts. All this should be considered not only in theory but also in medical education and practice, because most important is not only the philosophy of medicine but also to philosophize and speculate medicine and its therapeutic effects.

Twenty-five centuries later the value of Hippocratic messages are still contemporaries and of great importance not only in medicine but also in aspects referring to ecological environment and atmospheric pollution. Also, his message that “what drugs will not cure, the knife will”, has a prophetic value for modern surgery in the treatment of coronary artery and other diseases. Furthermore, the recent tendency for a predictive, medicine is well illustrated in his work “on predictions” and the example of a patient who is about to die and for whom the physician makes the predictive diagnosis: “This man is not going to die, but is going to become blind”.

The first Hippocratic aphorism contains the essence of medical philosophy:

“Life is short; and the art long; and the right time an instant; and treatment precarious; and the judgement difficult. It is necessary for the physician not only to provide the needed treatment but to provide for the patient himself and for those beside him and to provide for his outside affairs”.

In conclusion, the evolution of Hippocratic medicine and philosophy:

- a) Symbolizes the first creative period of scientific medicine.
- b) Epitomizes the history of Western civilization.
- c) Emphasizes that history of medicine is the medicine itself, and
- d) Reveals that medicine itself is an aspect of civilization.