



Hippocrates on Ethical Practice Management

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ABSTRACT

In today's society, it seems that there is a tension between successful practice management and ethical practice behavior. The doctor-patient relationship that is based on trust should be esteemed and preserved in our society. We should consider dedicating ourselves to the preservation of a trusted doctor-patient relationship. (J Chiropr Humanit 2004;11:44-48)

INTRODUCTION

Ethical practice management is almost an oxymoron in our society. Can a successfully marketed and managed business also be an ethical practice? If we make practice decisions based on business models without keeping the patient's best interest in mind, we devalue both the patient and the doctor. In this model, the patient is reduced to a customer; the doctor is just a vendor.

The doctor-patient relationship based on trust should be esteemed and preserved in our society. The patient must trust the provider to make all decisions based on what is best for the patient. Patients are vulnerable in their relationships with doctors and are taken advantage of easily. We must dedicate ourselves to the preservation of a trusted doctor-patient relationship.

The Greek physician Hippocrates identified the asymmetrical doctor-patient relationship and took the moral high ground of spelling

out an oath that identified and bridled the potential areas of abuse in a doctor-patient relationship. Those areas include practicing within one's training, the sanctity of life, financial compensation, sexual purity, and patient confidentiality. In addition to the patient-oriented portions of the oath, the physician vows to honor his mentors and teachers. Finally, Hippocrates identified a transcendent cause, the ancient Greek deities, to hold accountable those who violated the oath.¹

The Oath of Hippocrates

I swear by Apollo Physician and Aesclepius and Hygeia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witness, that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this covenant:

To hold him who has taught me this art as equal to my parents and to live in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brother in male lineage and to teach them this art - if they deserve to

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learn it - without fee and covenant: to give a share of precepts and oral instruction and all the other learning to my sons and to the sons of him who has instructed me and to pupils who have signed the covenant and taken an oath according to the medical law, but to no one else.

I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from harm and injustice.

I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly, I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.

I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work.

Whatever house I visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slave.

Whatever I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside the treatment in regard to the life of men, which on no account one must spread abroad, I will keep to myself holding such things shameful to be spoken about.

If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come. If I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.

How this oath changed the marketplace of medicine

The principles embodied in this oath elevated the profession of medicine to an almost sacrosanct level of respect in society. Hippocrates' oath changed the marketplace of medicine not only in ancient Greece, but for all time.

In a culture where the patient, especially an enslaved or poor female patient, was under the control of the physician, Hippocrates' oath was revolutionary. In the ancient world, physicians could kill deformed or unwanted babies after they were born or speed the death of an elderly or ill family member who had become a burden. Doctors could deny care to the poor, take sexual advantage of patients, and disseminate intimate secrets of the patient without recourse. At times, the risks were even more serious.

Hemlock was an ancient medicinal that in small doses was therapeutic but in larger doses was deadly. Patients would have to trust their physician that they would receive the correct dose. Prior to the Hippocratic Oath, a patient may have had legitimate concern that an adversary had paid the physician more for his demise than he had paid for his cure.

In time, it became evident that people preferred and even sought out the principled "Hippocratic" physicians whose oath to value life distinguished them from physicians who dealt in both healing and killing. The market drove virtually all Western physicians to become Hippocratic. Ethics directed the marketplace. If a doctor wanted patients, he took the oath and kept it. What did this oath say that changed the face of medicine forever?

Honor Your Mentors and Teachers

Hippocrates included honoring those who had taught the physician his art. In ancient Greece,

there was not a university system or retirement program. The art of medicine passed from a mentor to his protégée. Hippocrates believed that the student should honor his master not just with appreciation, but material support.

In modern times, this practice can be equated to donating to one's alma mater. Relentlessly pursuing the work the mentor began, continuously expanding one's knowledge, and selflessly passing that knowledge on to others is the greatest form of honor to one's mentor.

Practice with the Patient's Best Interest in Mind

Hippocrates vowed to provide the correct treatment for his patients and to protect them from harm. In the same manner, it would be our duty to protect our patients from harmful or unnecessary treatment. Also, we must not impede our patients from receiving the best possible treatment. Certainly, it is not enough that we do no harm; we must pursue the best care for our patients, even if this means referring them to someone better qualified.

Hippocrates also introduced the importance of preserving the confidentiality and dignity of patients. The physician should not inflict "injustice,... mischief," or sexual misconduct upon patients. Hippocrates identified the control that physicians had over their patients and chose to protect them from doctors who may take advantage of this one-sided relationship. This attempt to protect the patient's dignity is demonstrated in the value he placed on preserving life and practicing within one's scope of practice.

The Value of Preserving Life

Hippocrates did not make a moral statement about whether or not euthanasia or abortions were right or wrong. One of his works, *Dismembering of the Fetus in the Womb*, even explains how to perform an abortion.² His

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message in the Oath was that physicians were in the business of life and the promotion of life and should not be associated with death.

Giving a concoction to induce an abortion can be done without any particular healing knowledge. Likewise, euthanasia is not a complicated process. Involving a physician, who is dedicated to the preservation of life with killing of any sort, taints that physician and endangers the trust relationship between the physician and the patient.³

Scope of Practice

"I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work." This portion of the Oath addresses doing no harm and working within a physician's scope of practice. In Hippocrates' era, surgeons were not considered physicians. Hippocrates's would refer patients who needed surgery to a trained surgeon.

Later, surgery was taught to physicians and it became part of their accepted scope of practice. However, in Hippocrates' time dabbling in an area of practice in which the physician was not trained, or could cause harm to his patients, was considered unethical. Apparently, expanding medical practice was allowed if it was achieved through thorough training.

Transcendence

For an oath to have any credence or worth it must be made to a transcendent cause¹: Apollo

for Hippocrates³, Jesus Christ for this author. Hippocrates swore this Oath to the only deities that he knew. Today, the oaths taken by many medical institutions bear slight resemblance to the original Oath. In recent decades, the Oath was changed to reflect the views of our current Post-Christian⁴ society. The portions about abortion, surgery, and benevolence toward mentors were taken out. More worrisome for me, however, is the removal of any reference to transcendence. Now, more and more institutions are substituting references to God with statements like, “I make this pledge solemnly, freely, and upon my honor.”⁵ Removing transcendence from the oath equates to swearing by one’s own code of ethics—essentially swearing to do whatever feels right. This may sound noble to some, but individuals can be capricious in their belief of what is right and wrong and, by doing so, are able to justify any action. What would our reaction be to a President who refused to swear by God, but instead swore to rule by what he or she felt was right?

I have become convinced that people can justify any behavior. We need to be held accountable, but by whom? Ultimately, we are all accountable to God, but while we are here on earth, we need to use a system of peer review to ensure compliance to an ethical code.

DISCUSSION

What does all of this have to do with chiropractors in the 21st century? Chiropractors currently are viewed by some in the same light as pre-Hippocratic physicians were, insincere characters with questionable motives. This belief may not be justified, but patients desire to trust their doctors with their lives. They want to know that their doctors are held to a higher standard and would do whatever it took to ensure that everything that should be done is done. This

commitment requires much more than the absurd self-investiture of calling one’s self a “Principled Chiropractor.” Instead, to gain esteem in the eyes of our patients and society we need to establish and maintain a profession with ethical and moral principles that we will not violate.

Will an oath alone be adequate? No. Even though the original Hippocratic Oath has been reduced to a historic footnote, society still likes to think of doctors as part of an almost sacred order, whose self-sacrificial mission in life is to aid the ill and infirmed. Of course, this image of medicine has become increasingly tarnished in recent years.

What would it take for the chiropractic profession to earn this respect? I propose that we need to demonstrate a unified code of ethics that would not simply be in a written or recited oath, but would be part of our uncompromised credo, our corporate soul.

Some aspects of this credo already exist *de facto*. I am sure that most every practicing chiropractor would agree that sexual relations with a patient are always inappropriate. As a profession, chiropractic would agree that over-treatment or providing treatment for conditions outside of our scope of expertise would be unethical, as would violating the patient’s confidence.

Other ethical violations need to be addressed and brought to the table for discussion. Prescribing and selling nutritional supplements for profit instead of for patient necessity, soliciting patients for business ventures such as multi-level marketing, using diagnostic tests or treatment modalities based on financial gain rather than necessity, treatment plans that exceed what is indicated, and failing to refer to a more appropriate provider, are all examples of questionable activities on the part of chiropractors.

Chiropractic patients would be well served by a defined ethical pledge, a pledge that describes the doctor–patient relationship in an honorable and ethical manner. This pledge would be an expansion of the current chiropractic oath. By taking this pledge, the doctor would make himself accountable to his patients and to colleagues in the field who would be able to verify his adherence to this pledge. Imagine if a major chiropractic organization were to adopt this ethos and require abidance to this code of ethics for membership.⁶ If one failed to uphold the pledge, one would be disenfranchised from the organization. That organization could publicize to the patient population that its members have taken a pledge of moral servitude to humanity and that they are accountable for upholding that pledge.

Envision thousands of chiropractors providing each of their patients in an eye-to-eye meeting a hand-signed pledge to uphold that patient's honor and dignity with honesty and integrity. These chiropractors would pledge accountability to God and their peers and would provide the name and contact information of this organization as a symbol of accountability and commitment. It would not be long before every chiropractor either would be held in higher regard or would be held accountable for violating this pledge. Violating the pledge would result in removal from the organization and possibly loss of license.

Every patient, referring physician, and agency would insist on using the new Hippocratic chiropractor. This pledge, and our will to enforce it, would define the ethical boundaries of our profession. The marketplace would drive virtually all chiropractors to this higher plane. Those who want a successful practice would take this pledge and adhere to it.

CONCLUSION

Although the Hippocratic oath was introduced in ancient Greece, its influence extends to the present. Committing to uphold the patient's honor and dignity with honesty and integrity and at the same time submitting to accountability by God and peers, builds patient trust and grows a successful practice.

This paper has proposed a model by which the chiropractic profession can embrace these principles and apply them to ethical practice management standards. Chiropractors should consider making such a commitment to their patients today.

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