

# Doctors swear by Hippocrates



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Even though it is more than 2,500 years old, the Hippocratic Oath still exerts huge influence. However, we know surprisingly little of its creator, Hippocrates, who remains the undisputed “Father of Medicine”. He really is a puzzling historical character. We know that he was born around 460 BCE in Greece, lived to over 80 years of age on the Island of Cos, and was probably buried in Larissa, a small town in Thessaly.

Hippocrates was perhaps the most famous doctor of his time, and his contemporaries had only good things to say about him; Plato, for instance, considered him a ‘great teacher, and a perfect model to apply’. Not only did he cure the plague raging in Athens during his lifetime, he also refused to treat the King of Persia, as a personal (and risky!) gesture of loyalty. To this day, his image is that of a sound philosopher, a great diagnostician, and a man of integrity.

He was the first to break away from the pervasive religious, magical and ritualistic atmosphere that pervaded the healing arts at the time, and move to a logical, science-based approach to health, disease and convalescence. This radical shift in theory and practice was based on sound and thorough observation, careful diagnosis, and the judicious therapeutic use of the ‘Governing Factors’: lifestyle changes well familiar to Tibb practitioners and beneficiaries.

There is a huge collection of work attributed to Hippocrates. Hundreds of diagnostic texts, case histories and descriptions of diseases treated still survive, as well as many quotations and nuggets of medical wisdom. Unfortunately, in those more relaxed times physicians did not sign their work, so librarians were inclined to file all medical information under ‘Hippocrates’. Even so, this probably represents the consensus of medical thought and practice in those distant times although a lot of it was lost when the Library at Alexandria burnt down early in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE.

One disease that intrigued Hippocrates, and his followers, was ‘the sacred disease’, better known to us as epilepsy. Although he was not an atheist, he vigorously dismissed the prevailing idea of divine possession. He countered by asserting that the disease was caused by accumulation of phlegm in the brain, which at the time was an idea nothing short of revolutionary.

Hippocrates is probably most famous for his ‘humoral theory’. This proposed that a person’s state of health was largely determined by the balance, or otherwise, of four humours in the body: namely, sanguinous; phlegmatic; bilious; and melancholic. According to this, if a person becomes ill, medical treatment whether by changes in the lifestyle factors or by the use of herbal medicines, should aim to redress any imbalance in these humours.

Although modern medicine rejected this theory some time ago, it was still in vogue in many parts of the world until quite recently. Even so, if Hippocrates were to return, and had access to modern technology, he would no doubt modify it persuasively in the light of recent advances in human biochemistry and metabolism.

And so to his famous Oath. The short, one-page document starts with a fearsome invocation of the Greek deity at the time (Apollo, his son, Asclepius, daughters Hygeia and Panacea, and assorted gods and goddesses), and ends for good measure with a curse for failing to follow the doctoris instructions.

The Oath goes on to explain how to be a good doctor, with advice on ‘the pure and holy way’; insisting on respect for life, avoiding sexual molestation of patients, the importance of teaching, patient confidentiality, and desisting from gossip and market place tittle-tattle about patients and their family.

Much of his sage advice revolves around ‘diet’. This refers not only to food and drink, but more broadly to lifestyle issues in general. The doctoris repugnance for complicity in murder, especially by poisoning, is stressed, although euthanasia and abortion are dealt with somewhat ambiguously. And the first reference to specialisation is recorded, with the doctor advised to leave the use of the knife to the experts, that is, the surgeons.

The Hippocratic Oath came into general use about two hundred years BCE. Originally adopted by a small club of doctors, it soon became mainstream. About this time it was viewed with some suspicion by the general public, who suspected conspiracy, or even a secret society.

The original text changed to accommodate the religious upheavals that followed, as first Christianity, and then Islam, came to the fore. Out went the 'Greek Gods' and their acolytes, and in came 'God', 'Friends of God', 'Supreme Being', '-He who gives All', or "Lord over Life and Death" according to religious code. Islamic scholars translated the Oath as part of the Hippocratic Corpus into Arabic, so ensuring survival of precious medical knowledge through and beyond the European Dark Ages. During the Renaissance it was revived in the European universities springing up in Basel, Heidelberg and elsewhere.

The Hippocratic Oath is as powerful now as it ever was. It is a symbol of ethical virtue and remains the gold standard of present-day clinical practice. It carries considerable weight in common law, as, for example, its role in the Nuremberg War Crimes trials after World War II, and the US Roe vs Wade termination-of-life trial in the 1970s. It is in many ways viewed with nostalgia for a time of sound medical practice, and still occupies centre stage in philosophical discussions regarding abortion, euthanasia and patient confidentiality.

"I will prescribe regimens for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment and never do harm to anyone."

Excerpt taken from the Hippocratic Oath