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Hippocrates and the dignity of human life

Fritz Baumgartner, MD DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1067/mob.2002.123942>

To the Editors:

In Hertz's letter in the June 2001 issue of the Journal,¹ a startling suggestion is made. It is proposed that the Hippocratic oath merely instructs on the methods of abortion, not precluding its provision. I believe this contention to be quite erroneous, and have never heard such a hypothesis even suggested.

The Hippocratic oath, the same one I took on graduating from the University of California, Los Angeles, School of Medicine in 1984, states "I will not give to a woman an instrument to produce abortion. With purity and holiness I will pass my life and practice my art."

Is this really debatable? What evidence can lend to the hypothesis that Hippocrates was not debating abortion provision by physicians?

Even the Supreme Court justices in the 1973 *Roe v Wade* ruling knew full well what the Hippocratic oath said and meant. In fact, they mentioned it in their ruling. The justices in *Roe v Wade* said that the authority of Hippocrates still did not dissuade abortion practice in his time in Greece and Rome. They stated that only the Pythagorean school of philosophers frowned on abortion and suicide and that most Greek thinkers and physicians actually commended abortion. Only Hippocrates and the minority Pythagorean thinkers held this view against abortion, and later the teachings of Christianity were in agreement with Pythagorean ethic. Thus, the justices concluded that the Hippocratic oath is "a Pythagorean manifesto and not the expression of an absolute standard of medical conduct."

Indeed, the oath may have been a minority opinion among Greek physicians, but it was Hippocrates' opinion, and his intent, to separate his school of physicians practicing on a higher ethical plane from the mainstream of Greek medicine. If Hippocrates simply agreed with the Greek medical values of the day, then there would have been no need for Hippocrates to establish an oath that would separate himself and his school from the Greek mainstream. Hippocrates was counteracting his own time and culture; he was counteracting erroneous relativistic values. The core of his oath is, indeed, the expression of an absolute standard of medical conduct, one that has been used by physicians for nearly two and a half millennia. How foolish for us to think we can casually dismiss it.



As the expert medical advisor at the Nuremberg medical trials wrote in 1949, "I realized for the first time at the Nuremberg trials, the full meaning and importance of the contributions of Hippocrates and his school to medicine and human welfare. ... He apparently realized that a scientific and technical philosophy of medicine could not survive through the ages unless it was associated with a sound moral philosophy. One cannot conceive of a sound society with medicine that does not have a sound moral philosophy."²

We all need to make a decision. We can accept, or reject, the Hippocratic oath and the spirit in which it was written. But let's not pretend to straddle both sides of the fence.

Every single human life, born and unborn, is a precious, fantastic miracle, infinitely more so than what the combined physical structures of the World Trade Center towers and Pentagon once were. It's time for America—and medicine in particular—to grow up and face the truth. Violating the dignity of human life—legal or not—remains a crime against humanity. Shame on us in medicine for lacking the moral certitude to speak the truth, despite knowing the truth.

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