Comments on "Hippocrates Lost, A Professional Ethic Regained: Reflections on the Death of the Hippocratic Tradition"

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Dr. Newton begins her paper with the concept that the Hippocratic tradition is no longer with us. I am not sure that she is totally justified in making this statement. She sees the medical profession in the past as having been a largely secret religious society, closed to outsiders, deceitful to its patients, and nonscientific in nature. In some ways, she is correct. She is correct in saying that this has changed, and I am sure that there are few, if any, of us who would like to perpetuate those aspects of the old tradition. That is not, however, to deny that the tradition of secrecy in the past may well have served the physician of the prescientific era. Of the charisma and the mystique, which may well have been the doctor’s most therapeutic tools, some aspects still play a significant role in therapy. People feel better simply by having made a contact with a physician, or even with a clinic. As a matter of fact, some of those who are on the waiting list to be seen in psychiatric clinics do extremely well. Perhaps this is because they have now begun to recognize their problems and to work at them themselves. In some of the less sophisticated communities in developing countries, one is still able to appraise the role of witch doctors and the magical treatments...
believed in by their "patients." Sometimes, these are reported to be more effective than are certain of our modern medicines, so that even this aspect of the Hippocratic tradition may have served a less sophisticated society advantageously.

Many universities administer to the graduating class an oath referred to as the "Hippocratic Oath," but one, of course, that is much changed from the original. Other schools require their students to adhere to a different code. Their aim is to provide the new physician with guidelines that will ensure a high quality of medical care for the patient, and, as the codes indicate, maintain the honor and the noble tradition of the profession. The International Code of Medical Ethics, and the Declaration of Geneva (which was approved by the World Medical Association and adopted by member organizations), go a long way to modernize the ethics of the profession in the direction of the changing moral attitudes of society. These codes and the Health Disciplines Act of the Province of Ontario address most of the important moral issues and they guide the physician in his or her behavior and responsibilities toward the patient, setting out clearly those practices that constitute professional misconduct. The lawyers Morris C. Schumatcher and D. Jur write: "the physician has been trusted over the years because of the ethical and moral standards he subscribed to in taking the Hippocratic Oath . . . the patient knows he is neither going to be ripped off or ripped up by his doctor. He also knows that the doctor will take all due care and all reasonable measures to make him well and not do him in."

But society and its mores change, and it is the responsibility of medicine to respond to these changing attitudes. A criticism long leveled at medicine has been that it changes slowly. People say that it is too traditional, too protective of the past, too uncritical of its members, yet, in the eyes of many others, including at least some professionals in medicine, it has moved much too quickly and far in recent years. Surely the issue concerning abortion is one example in which the question of right or wrong has not been fully answered for many physicians, despite the fact that legal prohibitions to this practice have been removed in some jurisdictions. Similarly, the question recently posed by the Committee of the Anglican Church regarding euthanasia of seriously-retarded children is surely one of terrifying import for philosophers, lawyers, and physicians. It may be at these times that we need the old Oath more than ever, since it spoke with such certainty.