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Some Reflections On An Ageless Oath

EDWARD J. ZIMMERMANN, M.D.

The *Hippocratic Oath*, written about four hundred years before the birth of Christ, containing so many basic Christian concepts and accepted rules of ethical conduct, is unique and amazing.

More fully to appreciate the Oath and its continual applicability to the norms of modern ethical conduct and Christian idealism, let us cite several of its admonitions from the text.

FIRST QUOTE:

I will neither give a deadly drug to anyone, if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect.

This passage effectively condemns euthanasia, which, in our own time was declared an immoral procedure by Pope Pius XII, who, in the same papal allocution, promulgated guides for the use of narcotic drugs in the treatment of patients with hopeless, terminal illness.

It also accentuates the care, with which habit-forming drugs should be administered, even though, in that era the pharmaceutical catalogue was very slim indeed.

Additionally, it strongly urged those taking the Oath, never to become willing accessories in cases of contemplated suicide or murder.

SECOND QUOTE:

I will not give a woman an abortive remedy.

Could there be a more precise, direct or succinct statement than this?

Here is no ambiguity.

Here is no lengthy legal terminology.

Here is no inclusion of any discussion of exactly when the fetus becomes a complete human being, deserving of consideration under the law as regards the right to continued life.

Here is no citing of exceptions, even the possibility of malformations or maternal psychological complications. Here is no arousing of disturbing sympathy with tales of penalty or social disgrace.

And ending this frank statement with as noble a pronouncement as was ever uttered by man: *Integrity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.*

THIRD QUOTE:

Whatever house I may visit I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice and of all mischief.

Apparently, in those happy days one could still expect a physician to make a house call, which, comforting custom, in this modern era, has largely fallen into disrepute.

The young graduate from a medical school might be hard-pressed at the bedside of the sick in the home, to make a diagnosis without X-rays, laboratory reports, etc.

... all ... injustice and ... all mischief are all-embracing phrases, including every conceivable personal or professional transgression. *Injustice* would, for example, be permitting a difference in the treatment and service given a patient of wealth and a charity patient; one of high social standing, and a staff patient.

It also implies a strict conscience in submitting statements for services rendered.

All mischief certainly means avoiding any action that could be construed as a lapse from the moral standards expected from a Christian gentleman.

It would be advantageous if all who have taken the Oath, perhaps perfunctorily or as a sop to tradition, would now re-read it with care and rededicate their professional lives to conform to its promises and covenants. And more importantly, those who will take the Oath in the future, upon graduation, to pledge them-

selves, with Heaven's help, to abide by its admonitions.

Thus all, young and old could, with confidence, look forward to meriting the lofty promise which forms the final paragraph of the document: *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 men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.*

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