The Hippocratic Oath doesn't say 'First, Do No Harm'

The Greek physician Hippocrates (460 – 370 BC) is considered the father of modern medicine in Western culture. It would be unusual to take an ethics class at a medical school in the United States and not here mention of the author of the Hippocratic Oath.

Many people believe the Hippocratic Oath begins with the words, "First, do no harm."

It doesn't. In fact, that sentence doesn't appear anywhere in the Oath.

But Hippocrates clearly implies that he believed it was the physician's duty to protect life, not claim life. Take, for example, the following passage:

> *I will not give a fatal draught (pharmacon), to anyone if I am asked, nor will I suggest any such thing. Neither will I give a woman means to procure an abortion.*

Hippocrates apparently believed protection of life extended to the unborn, a fact that might surprise many people today. Americans tend to view abortion as an issue that pits Christians against non-Christians. Hippocrates was not a Christian of course (he lived four centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth), but he appears to have been a religious person, as he opens the Oath with a promise to "Apollo the Healer" and other gods.

Here is the entire Hippocratic Oath:

> *I swear by Apollo The Healer, by Asclepius, by Hygieia, by Panacea, and by all the Gods and Goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and*

judgment, this oath and this indenture.

To hold my teacher in this art equal to my own parents; to make him partner in my livelihood; when he is in need of money to share mine with him; to consider his family as my own brothers, and to teach them this art, if they want to learn it, without fee or indenture; to impart precept, oral instruction, and all other instruction to my own sons, the sons of my teacher, and to indentured pupils who have taken the physician's oath, but to nobody else.

I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing. Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly I will not give to a woman a fatal draught (pharmacon) to cause abortion. But I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art. I will not use the knife, not even, verily, on sufferers from stone, but I will give place to such as are craftsmen therein.

Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman, bond or free. And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets.

Now if I carry out this oath, and break it not, may I gain for ever reputation among all men for my life and for my art; but if I transgress it and forswear myself, may the opposite befall me.

Is the Oath still relevant today? It would not be unreasonable to think, as many do, that modern medical practitioners should not be bound by a nearly 2,500-year-old Oath dedicated to

defunct gods.

Dr. Philip Hawley Jr., a physician and former Assistant Professor of clinical pediatrics at University of Southern California, contends that the Oath can and should still guide those who practice medicine.

> *The ancient master reaches across two and a half millennia to remind us that virtue and natural law—not scientific prowess—should set the boundaries of our choices.*

What do you think? Is the Oath still relevant today?

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