

**Business Ethics**

**A Hippocratic Oath for Managers?**

The famous Hippocratic Oath is the earliest and most impressive document in medical ethics. One translation is:

“I swear by Apollo the physician, by Æsculapius, by Hygeia, Panacea, all the gods and goddesses, that, according to my best ability and judgment, I will keep this oath and stipulation; to reckon him who taught me this art equally dear to me as my parents; to share my substance with him and relieve his necessities if required; to regard his offspring as on the same footing as my own brothers, and to teach them this art if they shall wish to learn it, without fee or scipulation, and that by precept, oral teaching and every other mode of instruction, I will impart a knowledge of the art to my own sons and to those of my teachers, and to disciples bound by a stipulation and oath, according to the law of medicine, but to no others.

“I will follow that method of treatment, which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous. I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel; furthermore, I will not give to a Woman an instrument to produce abortion.

“With purity and with holiness I will pass my life and practice my art. I will not cut a person who is suffering with a stone, but will leave this to be done by practitioners of this work. Into whatever houses I enter I will go into them for the benefit of the sick and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption, and, further, from the seduction of females or males, bond or free.

“Whatever in connection with my professional practice, or not in connection with it, I may see or hear in the lives of men which ought not to be spoken abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret.

“While I continue to keep this oath inviolate, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of my art, respected always by, all men, but should I trespass and violate this oath, may the reverse be my lot.”

A modern version is the Declaration of Geneva (1948):

“I solemnly pledge myself to consecrate my life to the service of humanity. I will give to my teachers the respect and gratitude which is their due; I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity; the health of my patient will be my first consideration; I will respect the secrets which are confided in me; I will maintain by all in means in my power the honor and the noble traditions of the medical profession; my colleagues will be my brothers; I will not permit considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics, or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient; I will maintain the utmost respect for human life, from the time of conception; even under threat, I will not use my medical knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity. I make these promises solemnly, freely, and upon my honor.”

The Oath still persists as a myth in the medical profession. Not all doctors take it on graduation, and its implicit promise to supply medical service regardless of remuneration is openly flouted, especially in the US, where doctors fear to stop for accidents which might

result in costly negligence litigation. But the Oath and the Declaration at least provide a focus for moral debate in the profession.

Sir Eric Ashby (1968-69) and Richard Davis (1981) have suggested a Hippocratic Oath for academics. Davis suggests six “promises”:

1. I undertake, throughout my academic career, regardless of any position I hold, to base all judgements of others on an objective analysis of the available facts. When called upon to do so, I shall cite the exact information upon which my judgements are based.
2. My judgements of others shall, wherever possible, be made publicly. When anonymity is essential, I shall provide arguments worthy of public scrutiny.
3. I shall endeavour always to distinguish between my judgements on academic grounds and any personal interests. I shall always declare the latter, even if they require my withdrawal from a particular decision.
4. I shall at all times avoid in word and deed any form, of discrimination against others in race, religion, ethnic background, sex, marital status, age, political affiliation, nationality, and physical condition. I shall encourage my students and colleagues to do likewise in my presence.
5. All requests for judgement of the work of others will be treated by me as a matter for the utmost priority. If, for any reason beyond my control, I am unable to give them urgent attention I shall request to be relieved of my responsibility.
6. I recognise as an academic a basic obligation to use my intellect and training by teaching or writing for the illumination of the community, following the truth fearlessly wherever it may lead, regardless of vested interests. I accept the intellectual requirements of my students as a prior claim on my time, taking precedence over all other activities. I undertake the continual re-evaluation of my teaching techniques to ensure that students obtain the best education available.

This Assignment is for you to consider a possible Hippocratic Oath for managers. In a brief report to the Australian Institute of Managers, answer these questions:

1. What kinds (if any) of behaviour by managers would you consider unethical? (If the group cannot agree, give the numbers of dissenters.)
2. Provide the consensus of the group on the wording of a proposed oath for managers. (I mean a personal code rather than a company code.) If there is no agreement, provide the various wordings and the number of students associated with each.
3. Discuss the pressures, if any, on the individual manager against compliance with such an oath. That is, what forces exist, if any, on the manager to prevent him or her from behaving “ethically”?
4. Should there be different oaths for public-sector managers and private-sector managers? Are the forces on the two groups different, and, if so, how?

### **References:**

Ashby, Sir Eric, “A Hippocratic Oath for the Academic Profession,” *Minerva* 7: 64-66, Autumn-Winter, 1968-69.

Davis, R., “A Hippocratic Oath for Academics?” *Vestes* 24 (2): 9-14, 1981.