**Title: Hippocratic Oath has changed and so should we**

**Authors:**

**Dr. Ambarish Bhattacharyya**, MD, MRCPI, FRCP, FACP, Nightingale Hospital, Kolkata

Address: 3A Sura East Road, Sadhan Apartment, Kolkata: 700010

Email: [ambarish2007dr@gmail.com](mailto:ambarish2007dr@gmail.com) Moble: 09903209594

**Dr. Kabita Bhattacharya**, MD, Glocal Healthcare Ltd, Kolkata

Glocal Health Care Ltd, Eco space action area II, New town, Kolkata: 700156

Email: [kabitadabadi@yahoo.com](mailto:kabitadabadi@yahoo.com)

**Dr. Kaushik Ghosh**, MD, MRCPI, FRCP, FACP, Murshidabad Medical College and Hospital

Dept of Medicine, Murshidabad Medical College and Hospital, Murshidabad:742101

Email: [drkaushikghosh@gmail.com](mailto:drkaushikghosh@gmail.com) . moble: 9547901343

**Dr. Amitava Acharyya**, Mphil in Public Health (NCDs), MIPHA, Regional Ayurveda Research Institiute (CCRAS)-Gangtok

Address: Nona, Uluberia, Howrah-711315

email: [acharyyaamitava@gmail.com](mailto:acharyyaamitava@gmail.com) , mobile: 9830750605

**Corresponding author: Dr. Ambarish Bhattacharyya**, MD, MRCPI, FRCP, FACP, Nightingale Hospital, Kolkata , Address: 3A Sura East Road, Sadhan Apartment, Kolkata: 700010, Email: [ambarish2007dr@gmail.com](mailto:ambarish2007dr@gmail.com) Moble: 09903209594

Funding support: No funding support

Conflict of interest: No

**Abstract**

Very few are aware that a couple of years back some very important changes have been made to the Hippocratic Oath. Change is a normal process of life and so it is not surprising that the Oath has undergone some changes. We try to follow the evolution of the Oath with time, vis-à-vis, we also need to analyze as to why these changes had become necessary and how are they going to affect the daily lives of doctors (especially in India). We believe that our general population needs to be informed about the Oath *in verbatim,* and understand what it means. So that when they think of citing it as a criticism against doctors, they should at least know what they are referring to. Finally, we think that the Oath is not restricted to just doctors. It was and is applicable for all humans.

**Article**

“*The old order changeth yielding place to new*

*And God fulfills himself in many ways*

*Least one good custom should corrupt the world*”1.

As the poet Lord Tennyson once said, it is just a matter of time that all things change. As a matter of fact, time itself is never static! Evolution is nothing but this eternal changing process and if evolution had not occurred then humans would never have come into existence. Point to be noted here is even “good customs” can “corrupt the world” and hence change is needed to prevent/avoid corruption as well. Even religious texts echo this belief of “resurrection” and “change”:

“*earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust;*

*in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ;*

*who shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working*”2.

Medical science is no different. Every day new discoveries are being made. New concepts and theories are being conceived and rejected. So why should Hippocratic Oath be any different? How many medical practitioners can actually recite the Hippocratic Oath *in toto*? Most can’t. But what is common amongst all doctors is that we have imbibed the essence and the meaning of the oath and live our lives in accordance with it. There will always be emotions and sentiments attached with it (as it should), however, time has come for us to take another look at it.

*The in verbatim* translation from the oldest surviving Greek version of the Hippocratic Oath is as follows3:

“*I swear by*[*Apollo*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo)*the Healer, by*[*Asclepius*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asclepius)*, by*[*Hygieia*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hygieia)*, by*[*Panacea*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/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 pessary 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*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kidney_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*”

The basic concepts of “*primum non nocere*”, “confidentiality”, “*bona fide agere*” are all laid down in it. But there are numerous points which are redundant today. e.g. how many of us would swear in the names of the Greek Gods today? Secondly, how many doctors worldwide actually provide financial support to all their teachers? Most of us would treat them free of charge (if need be), but sharing our own earnings with our teachers! But this was present in the oath. And most importantly will anyone (including the law of the land) support the fact that only children of doctors would be allowed to become doctors (and no-one else)? But then, these are also clauses within the Oath. So, if one part of it has to be enforced (or holds true) then surely the rest of it should too! Very frequent we hear non-medicos saying that doctors have forgotten their oath or doctors should live by their oath. Then let’s enforce it “*in verbatim”*.

These questions must have appeared in the minds of our predecessors and as a result the oath changed. In the early 1960s the American Medical schools changed it to the penultimate:

“*I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant:*

*I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.*

*I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures [that] are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and*[*therapeutic nihilism*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Therapeutic_nihilism)*.*

*I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.*

*I will not be ashamed to say "I know not," nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.*

*I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know. Most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. If it is given me to save a life, all thanks. But it may also be within my power to take a life; this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play at God.*

*I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick.*

*I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.*

*I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm.*

*If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy life and art, respected while I live and remembered with affection thereafter. May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help.*”

But this was still not keeping *at par* with the times. So recently (2017) the Oath changed again and for the very first time it says that doctors “should take care of their own health” too5. Society cannot demand that doctors sacrifice themselves for others. Of course, selflessness of service might still be upheld, but that does not mean that doctors do not have a right to look after themselves. Most importantly, what our general public has failed to notice is the fact there is nothing in the Hippocratic Oath that should not be practiced by all individuals.

Remember the ten commandments6?

*“*[*Honour thy father and thy mother*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honour_thy_father_and_thy_mother)

[*Thou shalt not kill*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thou_shalt_not_kill)

[*Thou shalt not commit adultery*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thou_shalt_not_commit_adultery)

[*Thou shalt not steal*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thou_shalt_not_steal)

[*Thou shalt not bear false witness*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thou_shalt_not_bear_false_witness_against_thy_neighbour)

[*Thou shalt not covet*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thou_shalt_not_covet)*”*

Isn’t this another version of the Hippocratic Oath? “Do no evil, honor elders, help everyone in need”. So why is it that the entire world forgets these basic principles of humanity and doctors (who are part of the same society) are continuously reminded (and quite often reprimanded) using the Oath as an excuse? So our humble submission to all our fellow citizens would be “let’s not restrict the Hippocratic Oath to just doctors; let every human take the same pledge and lead our lives in accordance with its basic principles”.

References:

1. Lord Alfred Tennyson. Idylls of the King: The Passing of Arthur.
2. English funeral service. Book of common prayers.
3. Hippocrates of Cos (1923). ["The Oath"](http://www.loebclassics.com/view/hippocrates_cos-oath/1923/pb_LCL147.299.xml). *Loeb Classical Library*. **147**: 298–299. [doi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_object_identifier):[10.4159/DLCL.hippocrates\_cos-oath.1923](https://doi.org/10.4159%2FDLCL.hippocrates_cos-oath.1923). Retrieved 6 October 2015.
4. Peter Tyson. The Hippocratic Oath today. NOVA. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/hippocratic-oath-today.html>
5. Ramin Walter Parsa-Persi. The Revised Declaration of Geneva A Modern-Day Physician’s Pledge. JAMA. Published online October 14, 2017. doi:10.1001/jama.2017.16230
6. Ten Commandments. The Bible. Exodus 20: 1 - 17