

## OATH

*“First, do no harm.”* This might be a worn-out doctor cliché, but there is little doubt that the phrase has sincere, insurmountable weight, and that in it is contained the essence of the medical profession. On the way home from school one day with my carpool-mate, Eric, we were discussing the results to an exam that had just been returned. Although we both received good scores, we both felt we could have done better. Eric lamented about the mistakes we made that could have been avoided if we were more careful; in response, I affirmed his desire to improve, but also encouraged him by saying that the scores we got were still quite good. He responded with words that are burned into my mind: “We make a mistake now, and we get a lower score. When we’re doctors, we make a mistake, and it will be someone else’s life.” Today, not all doctors swear by the Hippocratic Oath, but I believe that the spirit of this ancient code of ethics is still as relevant as it ever was.

*“I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant.”* As one that treats the sick, a physician must bear the weight of these words. Dealing with matters of life-or-death and the quality of life, it is the responsibility of all doctors to do the very best that they can at all times and in all things. This should apply far earlier than an actual practice; medical students might find both purpose and strength in recognizing that the questions on the tests that they take will not remain questions, but will become the conditions and concerns of their future patients. Not everyone can top the board examinations, but everyone can strive to be excellent, and the medical profession demands no less. The faith that a patient puts in a doctor, entrusting his health, can only be acknowledged with diligence and painstaking determination.

*“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.”* A physician must remain humble, which can mean different things at different times. First and foremost, humility is necessary to cope with the struggles that doctors face. Medical school is difficult, to say the least; the actual profession, even more so. Dealing with the possibility of failure is necessary to carry on as a

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medical practitioner. At times, the most prudent course of action may be to point the patient to someone who can do more for them. At other times, the only course of action may be to hope and pray. To leave your patient in the hands of another or in the hands of God after doing everything you can for them takes a humility without hesitation. The finest expression of this humility is to persistently seek improvement. Medicine is continually advancing; keeping up with the constantly evolving science is necessary to provide the best healthcare possible. The importance of being informed is often understated, but always imperative. A doctor who is updated with research in their specific field, rather than tell a patient that their case is hopeless, might refer them to a hospital in another country doing research that could help that patient. Not all patients can afford to go abroad, but even the ones that cannot might try to find a way, and if they do, then they might get better; none of that can happen if the doctor simply tells the patient that they are untreatable. The humility of a doctor is to never become complacent, and to keep learning and growing in order to treat people well.

*“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.”* It remains to be remarkable that a physician has the capacity and the opportunity to care deeply for an absolute stranger. At the pinnacle of all doctors that ever practiced are those that truly cared. From a heart that is genuinely concerned for the welfare of another human being, everything else follows. The excellence and humility and all other qualities of a good doctor attain their highest form and are put into practice most consistently when a doctor has authentic interest in the well-being of the patient. Everything that doctors do, at their very core, should be for the people. Needless to say, this is exhausting; but I do believe that any amount of fatigue can be overcome if you truly care for someone. To care is to go the extra mile each and every time for someone. In the daily chance to care for someone else lies the potential for a doctor to take medicine beyond its character as a profession to that of a vocation.

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*“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.”* The interactions between doctor and patient are small but significant moments that can be used to form relationships; having conversations, building trust, and offering encouragement are not on every doctor's to-do list, but they could be. Something as simple as taking the time to explain what is going on in a patient's body or what a drug does can go a long way. Helping patients believe in themselves, being honest with them, and getting to know them not only makes treatment a more pleasant experience for the patient, but could also help a doctor treat them in a way that they can be happy with. To become attentive to what an illness does to a person not only physiologically, but also psychologically is paramount in being able to eventually say that a person is truly healthy. A patient could be scared or confused, and in response a doctor can be reassuring or comforting. If necessary, a doctor can even reference a counselor. To go even beyond an individual practice, a doctor possesses abilities and experience that could help build a community which promotes healthy lifestyles by encouraging health literacy. Something about the system in place must be done so that hospitals will no longer have to turn people away because they cannot afford healthcare. To believe in health is to believe in health for all; this dream is one that doctors should not only champion for, but also become involved in. To have empathy – to share the feelings of others, and to remember that your patients are people: this is what takes the role of a doctor as a professional far beyond a mere profession.

There are countless ways to help people, but I have chosen the path of a doctor: to struggle in becoming excellent, humble and caring, to relentlessly pursue healing, and to see not only the physiological, but also look to the psychological, the social, and beyond;

But first, to do no harm.