



THE MEDICAL OATH OF CONSECRATION OF ANCIENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

The schools of medicine are authorized to offer genuine physicians and surgeons particularly. The health care providers are obliged to observe supreme code of ethics in their professional life. The practice of taking the famous Hippocratic Oath, one of its recent version, on the graduation ceremony in the contemporary medical education systems serves as the pledge of professional leniency and loyalty to be kept by the doctors, but has lost its true sense and real purpose and remains as a mere custom. The article searches the authenticity and antiquity of the medical oath, highlights the real code of ethics in the ancient medical oath, the eastern influence on the western medical oath and the necessity of an oath taking upon the inception of medical schooling. The medical oath has its roots in Upanishat and Samhita, the 'anushasana (exhortation) given to the antevaasin (student residing with the teacher) structures the base and a conclusive and convincing relic Indian medical oath is presented before the entire schools of medicine.

Key words: Ancient Indian medical oath, Anushasana, code of ethics

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Indian medical training adopted the residential schooling system¹ (Antevaasin) with the disciple living near or with the teacher². The highly esteemed classical textbooks of Ayurveda have described explicitly the acceptance of the medical student by his teacher

based on the customs, beliefs and practices prevailed at the time in the Indian community³. The ritual, considered one among the sixteen rites of passage, leads the pupil close to the teacher and is initiated by the latter⁴. The samhitas of Ayurveda have specified definite protocols in specific chapters regarding training of medical scholars. The instructions to the students on code of professional ethics in the field of medicine should be accepted as the most antiquated reference of the medical oath when depicted in the form of a pledge. The ethical charter for medical practitioners prescribed in Charaka Samhitha predates the famous Hippocratic Oath almost by two centuries. A translation of the former explained in Charaka Samhita Vimanasthana 8th chapter is as follows.

THE OATH OF INITIATION^{5,6}

The teacher then should instruct the disciple in the presence of the sacred fire, Brahmanas [Brahmins] and physicians.

1. 'Thou shalt lead the life of a celebrate, grow thy hair and beard, speak only the truth, eat no meat, eat only pure articles of food, be free from envy and carry no arms.

2. There shall be nothing that thou should not do at my behest except hating the king, causing another's death, or committing an act of great unrighteousness or acts leading to calamity.

3. Thou shalt dedicate thyself to me and regard me as thy chief. Thou shalt be subject to me and conduct thyself for ever for my welfare

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and pleasure. Thou shalt serve and dwell with me like a son or a slave or a supplicant. Thou shalt behave and act without arrogance, with care and attention and with undistracted mind, humility, constant reflection and ungrudging obedience. Acting either at my behest or otherwise, thou shalt conduct thyself for the achievement of thy teacher's purposes alone, to the best of thy abilities.

4. If thou desirest success, wealth and fame as a physician and heaven after death, thou shalt pray for the welfare of all creatures beginning with the cows and Brahmanas.

5. Day and night, however thou mayest be engaged, thou shalt endeavour for the relief of patients with all thy heart and soul. Thou shalt not desert or injure thy patient for the sake of thy life or thy living. Thou shalt not commit adultery even in thought. Even so, thou shalt not covet others' possessions.

6. Thou shalt be modest in thy attire and appearance. Thou shouldst not be a drunkard or a sinful man nor shouldst thou associate with the abettors of crimes. Thou shouldst speak words that are gentle, pure and righteous, pleasing, worthy, true, wholesome, and moderate. Thy behavior must be in consideration of time and place and heedful of past experience. Thou shalt act always with a view to the acquisition of knowledge and fullness of equipment.

7. No persons, who are hated by the king or who are haters of the king or who are hated by the public or who are haters of the public, shall receive treatment. Similarly, those who are extremely abnormal, wicked, and of miserable character and conduct, those who have not vindicated their honour, those who are on the point of death, and similarly women who are unattended by their husbands or guardians shall not receive treatment.

8. No offering of presents by a woman without the behest of her husband or guardian shall be accepted by thee. While entering the patient's house, thou shalt be accompanied by a man who is known to the patient and who has his permission to enter; and thou shalt be well-clad, bent of head, self-possessed, and conduct thyself only after repeated consideration. Thou shalt thus properly make thy entry. Having entered, thy speech, mind, intellect and senses shall be entirely devoted to no other thought than that of being helpful to the patient and of things concerning only him. The peculiar customs of the patient's household shall not be made public. Even knowing that the patient's span of life has come to its close, it shall not be mentioned by thee there, where if so done, it would cause shock to the patient or to others. Though possessed of knowledge one should not boast very much of one's knowledge. Most people are offended by the boastfulness of even those who are otherwise good and authoritative.

9. There is no limit at all to the Science of Life, Medicine. So thou shouldst apply thyself to it with diligence. This is how thou shouldst act. Also thou shouldst learn the skill of practice from another without carping. The entire world is the teacher to the intelligent and the foe to the unintelligent. Hence, knowing this well, thou shouldst listen and act according to the words of instruction of even an unfriendly person, when his words are worthy and of a kind as to bring to you fame, long life, strength and prosperity.'

10. Thereafter the teacher should say this- 'Thou shouldst conduct thyself properly with the gods, sacred fire, Brahmanas, the guru, the aged, the scholars and the preceptors. If thou hast conducted thyself well with them, the precious stones, the grains and the gods become well disposed towards thee. If thou shouldst conduct



thyselves otherwise, they become unfavourable to thee'. To the teacher that has spoken thus the disciple should say, "so be it"

The other couple of treatises of the Greatest trio of Ayurveda have descriptions analogous to Charaka Samhita on the initiation of a medical student and the commandments rendered^{7,8}. Acharya Surutha has accounted an ethical precept on personal hygiene, rapport with the patient and interaction with the messenger and the attendants while a medical scholar enters his profession⁹. The exhortation from Surutha Samhita Sutrathana 2nd Chapter and 10th Chapter is as follows:-

'Then after circumambulating the fire thrice the teacher should speak to the pupil in the presence of fire – abstaining from passion, anger, greed, confusion, conceit, egoism, envy, cruelty, backbiting, falsehood, idleness and infamy, you should be pure, having cut your nails and hairs, in ochre robes, invariably following truth, penance, celibacy and salutation; you should pursue standing, movement, citing, sleep, eating and study as permitted by me and should do whatever is favorable and beneficial to me, by behaving otherwise it would be unrighteous for you leading to unfruitful learning without brilliance. Brahmins, elders, poor, friends, mendicants, submissive gentlemen, orphans and those approaching for help should be treated with thy medicines like thy family members, this is good; hunters, fowlers, fallen and inner hold not be treated; thus learning shines and one attains friends, fame, virtue, wealth and enjoyments. Thou shouldst abstain from sitting, living and cutting joke with women; moreover no gifts other than food from them should be accepted.'

A BRIEF COMMENTARY TO THE PLEDGE

The entire oath expresses high sense of morale, dedication and ethics from part of the

physician, a vivid understanding may be procured if analyzed in different sections.

A. Religious cues The spirit of the entire injunction is essentially religious in conformity with the ancient Indian tradition and thoughts and is prescribed in a ritualistic mode³. A version of the universal invocation for peace can be perceived in pray for all creatures with utmost importance given to cows and Brahmins who are considered most auspicious. The elements are implicative of ancient Vedic prayers. The strict injunction to follow the oath is confirmed by the description of rewards announced in the form of precious stones, the grains, and the favorable disposition of the Gods towards the student.

B. Personal hygiene principles The extreme somatic and psychic sanctity is to be observed in studentship and is illustrated in terms of humble appearance, truthfulness and restraint sensual inclinations. The advice of not to carry weapon is looked up on as the egalitarian concept of accepting virtuous and meritorious ones as disciples by the teacher disregarding the caste system as Brahmanas will carry no arms¹⁰.

C. Asceticism in student life The celibate life in studentship favors proper learning of the Vedas and admits the fulfillment of the first stage of his life agreeable to the social rules of the ancient Indian community to which he belongs. The celibacy furthermore provides him the purity and the conservation of energy.

D. Student teacher relationship The teacher shall consider his disciple as his son or slave or supplicant. The entire activity of the student therefore should be favorable to the teacher by obeying him. He will be under the protection of the teacher who will provide him all the necessities. The concept was the quintessential characteristic of ancient schooling system



inclusive of medical and non medical disciplines. The freedom of choice was not restricted as he was alleged to follow only the congenial deeds of the teacher.

E. Higher education/practical training/ entry to profession : The diligent learning of the science is entertained with apt practical orientation and equipping oneself for a dexterous professional entry. The scholar should obtain the license of practice from the authority, and the commandment reflects the firm responsibility of the ancient community in preventing quacks exploiting the people.

F. Dedicated physician after professional entry : The well trained medical scholar is committed to succor the pains of the entire community on entering to the greatest profession of clinical practice with unmitigated allegiance. The patient's welfare is to be the highest among all personal considerations of the physician. The strict direction of not to harm a patient for personal benefits reflects the attempts of a social servant to safeguard the claims of the penniless.

G. Code of conduct of the physician : The physician's behavior, thoughts, words and actions deeply influence the society and the patient. The purity instructed to be observed in the oath by the physician proclaims the elevated positive attributes of the ancient Indian society, which they imparted to their immediate descendants.

H. Moral cues in clinical practice : The stringent ethical considerations are contemplated in relationship of the physician with members of the opposite sex as patients or messengers or attendants. The morale is to be ensured in speech, mind, intellect and senses. The ancient medical training was extremely against adultery as is reflected in repeated verses.

I. The physician's right and the patients' right: The oath protects the physician from social antagonism by giving the power of discretion to provide or deny treatment on ethical grounds. The physician also has the responsibility not to disclose personal concerns of the patient to the public and to him too.

J. The successful physician : The instruction is to follow the oath precisely for accomplishing fame, long life, strength prosperity, and heaven after death and is suggestive of the accomplishment of the four objects of human pursuit consonant with Vedic teaching.

A similar injunction for a Vedic scholar, derived from the concepts and beliefs of the Hindu religion is referred in the eleventh lesson (anuvak) of the Taittiriya Upanishad which is in the form of an exhortation of the teacher upon the pupil who is about to depart from the teacher after finishing his studies. Taittiriya Upanishad said to be written in the 6th to 5th century BC antecedes Charaka Samhita and may be cited as the reference of an oath taking in the Vedic era. The exhortation is as follows:-

“Having taught the Vedas the teacher exhorts the disciple - "Thou shouldst speak the truth always and involve only in virtuous activities. Thou shall not swerve from the study of the Vedas. Having gathered the pleasant and desired wealth for the teacher the thread of progeny shall never be cut by thee. Thou shall never stray away from the truth, never swerve the obligatory duties assigned to thee. Thou shall not deviate from the beneficial and from prosperity. Let thee not stray away from the study and teaching of the Vedas. Thou shall not diverge from the rites due to the gods and manes. Thou shouldst reckon thy mother as thy God, thy father as thy god, thy teacher as thy God and thy guest as thy god. Thou shouldst engage in those works only which



are free of blemishes, not others. Thou shouldst follow good deeds done by thy teacher, not others. Whichever Brahmanas there are superior to us, thou shouldst remove their fatigue by serving them with seats. Gifts should be given with reverence, devotion and faith. It should never be given without respect and attention. It should be given in plenty, with modesty, with fear and with compassion. Now if there should arise in thee any doubt as regards any sacred work, or as regards conduct, thou shouldst act in those matters as do those Brahmanas there, who are guileless, of good judgment and obliged to duties, engaged by others in the performance of sacrificial rites or an independent man not employed in any one's sacrificial work. Now as regards dealing with persons of ill-fame, do thou deal with them, as do the Brahmanas there, who are guileless, of good judgment and obliged to duties, engaged by others in the performance of sacrificial rites or an independent man not employed in any one's sacrificial work."

This is the injunction. This is the advice. This is the secret of the vedas. This is the commandment. This should be observed and verily this should be observed¹¹.

DISCUSSION

The directives to the disciple (Antevaasinah Anushasana) of Taittareeya Upanishat is hinged on Sruti ('that which has been heard', which is canonical, consisting of eternal revelation and unquestionable truth)¹² and Smriti ('that which has been remembered', which is supplementary and may change over time)¹³. It emphasizes the self preservation of an individual through Veda lessons (adhyayana) presenting paramountcy to truth and virtue, through physical acts and super physical acts (performance of yajna, tapa etc.) to increase prosperity, through ultimate devotion and submission to the teacher, through performing

the obligatory rites due to the Gods, one's own father, mother, teacher guests and fore fathers and paying due respect to each, through pursuing the teacher in harmonious, gracious and sociable deeds and emulating the Brahmins (who have mastered the Vedas)¹⁴ in any deeds of suspicion, through serving tokens of respect and articles of comfort to the venerable personalities the service being provided according to one's means with the steady motivation derived from the dynamic faith in the scriptures and words of the teacher, with the fear of 'dharmashastra', with modesty and with compassion¹⁰. The repeated instruction of 'never swerve' in the verse suggests the gravity of cohering to the entire principles in the whole life span of an individual and not for a certain period of time. The whole exhortation thence recommends a meek and modest living connected with the ancient Indian heritage which is to be followed irrespective of the school of training.

The medical oath delineated in the compendiums of Ayurveda is the medical version of the ancient Vedic pledge and has adopted the religious essence to a greater extent from the latter emanating ancient Indian culture and customs. The medical oath has specified laws of personal physical and mental hygiene, celibacy, veracity, responsibility and reliability of a physician for his success.

The oath is elucidated in connection with the elements of medical training and has specified eligibility norms for one to be a medical scholar¹⁵ ensuring disciplined and proficient physicians after the medical training. The ultimate submission to the teacher by the scholar is the initial compulsion modulating the courtesy of the student to the zenithal meekness that he bestows to all the luminaries providing him with knowledge. The health sciences being dependent on the



beneficiary, essentially a morsel of the human community, medical scholars should epitomize modesty, integrity and immaculacy in social living. The ancient medical oath henceforth affirms the adoption of the ethical axioms in the student life and in the work life.

The significance of morality in the profession of health care is well established in a large quantum of the verse stating the oath¹⁶. The absolute advices on the attitude of the physician towards his patient, messenger, care taker of the patients in his sex group and in the other group necessitates the highest decency of a physician.

The oath defines the rights of a physician and allows him not to get entangled in actions which defame him. Nevertheless it protects and respects the priorities of the patient too. The dedication of a medical professional to his science and to the community is conveyed in the pledge which is the need of the hour. The oath concludes approving the scholars of the great science of life to procure lessons from the entire world through the tool quartet of valid knowledge- Agama, Pratyaksha, Anumana and Upamana to empower themselves and advocates the stringent observation of the pledge in the success of their life.

The ancient medical oath accentuates approximately the entire content of the Hippocratic Oath which in its original form beholds the core comparable with an indigenous tradition. The original oath was written in ionic Greek between the third and fifth century BC¹⁷. As Edelstein points out 'the so called oath of Hippocrates is document, uniformly conceived and thoroughly saturated with Pythagorean manifesto¹⁸, Pythagorean doctrine itself is thought to be highly influenced by Eastern thought¹⁹. The recent versions of the Hippocratic Oath urges more on medical confidentiality and

non-maleficence. The ritualistic mode, the moral cues and the hygienic principles of the ancient medical oath expresses the divineness of the medical profession. The two are much comparable in concepts of devotion to teacher, dedication to the science and profession, responsibility to the community of sufferers, code of conduct and ethics, securing the patient and his preference and the spirit to observe the rules in the whole life. The concept of asceticism in student life, the duty to withhold services under specified conditions and the value which places patients' life above all contributes further more uniqueness to the ancient medical oath³.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of taking an oath or an affirmation serves as an implied contract of loyalty and stability with in the oath taker and the authority before which it is complied. The pledge asserted by a health professional score extra virtue as he is committed to and connected with the community he serves. The eastern sense of ethics is not explicitly seen in letter and form in the recent versions of the Hippocratic Oath and accordingly a medical oath which expresses the unconditional candor of a health care provider is most demanded in the current scenario of massive medical negligence. There arises the rationale of an exclusive medical oath encompassing the exhortations from Taittareeya Upanishat eleventh lesson and Charaka Samhita Vimanasthana 8th chapter which confirms the legitimate rendition of the code of ethics.

THE RELIC MEDICAL OATH COMPREHENDED

अथैनमग्ननसकाशे ब्राह्मणसकाशे भिषक्सकाशे
चानुभशष्यात् – सत्यवादिना निर्मत्सरेणाशस्त्रधारिणा च
भवितव्यं । अनुत्सेकेनावहितेन अनन्यमनसा विनीतेन



अवेक्ष्यावेक्ष्यकाररणा अनसूयकेन चाभ्यनुज्ञातेन प्रविचरितव्यं ।
सर्वात्मना च आतुराणामारोग्याय प्रयतितव्यं । जीवितहेतोरपि
चातुरेभ्यो नाभिद्रोग्धव्यं । मनसाऽपि च परिस्त्रियो
नाभिगमनीयास्तथा सर्वमेव परस्वं । नभृतवेशपरिच्छेन
भवितव्यं । श्लक्ष्णशुक्लधर्म्यशर्म्यमधन्यसत्यहितमितवचसा
देशकालविचारिणा स्मृतिमता ज्ञानोत्थानोपकरणसंपत्सु नित्यं
यत्रवता च । ज्ञानवताऽपि च नात्यर्थमात्मनो ज्ञाने
विकथितव्यं न चैव ह्यस्ति सुतरामायुर्वेदस्य पारं, तस्मदप्रमत्तः
शश्वदभियोगमस्मिन् गच्छेत् ॥

(Charaka Samhita Vimanasthana; Chapter
8; 8-14)

I hereby solemnly affirm in the presence of
my preceptors, elders, learned souls and sacred
fire that I shall be committed to truth, shall refrain
from envy and carry no arms; that I shall behave
and act without arrogance, with care and
attention, undistracted mind, humility, constant
reflection and ungrudging obedience ; that I shall
always endeavor for the well- being of patients
and living beings with all my heart and soul; that
I shall not desert my patient for the sake of my
life and living; that I shall not commit adultery
even in my thought: that I shall be modest in my
attire and appearance ; that I shall always speak
words which are gentle, pure, righteous, pleasing,
worthy, true , wholesome and moderate; that I
shall behave in accordance with time and place
and heedful of past experience; that I shall
dedicate myself to learning and strive constantly
for the acquisition of knowledge and excellence
of equipments; that I shall not boast my
knowledge even though I am possessed of
knowledge; that I shall apply myself with diligence
to make consistent and honest efforts to be in
constant touch with the science of Ayurveda
which has no limit, to update my knowledge.

सत्यं वद । धर्मं चर । मातृदेवो भव । पितृदेवो भव ।
आचार्य देवो भव । अतिथिदेवो भव । स्वाध्यायप्रवचनाभ्यां

न प्रमदितव्यं । देवपितृ कार्याभ्यां न प्रमदितव्यं ।
यान्यवद्द्यानि कर्माणि तानि सेवितव्यानि । नो इताराणि ।
यान्यस्माकं, सुचरितानि तानि त्वयोपास्यानि । नो इतराणि ।
एष आदेशः । एष उपदेशः । एषा वेदोपनिषत् ।
एतदनुशासनम् । एवामुपसितव्यं । एवामुचैतदुपास्यम् ।

(Taittareeya Upanishat; 11 th Anuvak; 1-4)

I shall always speak the truth and perform
obligatory duties as enjoined in scriptures
religiously. I shall reckon my mother as veritable
god; that I shall reckon my father as veritable
god; that I shall reckon my teacher as veritable
god, that I shall reckon my guest as veritable god;
; I shall not stray away from learning and
teachings of Vedas; that I shall not refrain from
the duties to gods and manes ; I shall engage in
only those works that are free from blemishes; I
shall perform only good deeds and not others;

This is the injunction. This is the advice. This
is the secret of the Vedas. This is the
commandment. This should be observed and
verily this should be observed.

Quoting Aeschylus (ancient Greek
dramatist) - “It is not the oath that makes us
believe the man, but the man the oath”, the
authors emphasize the actualization of the vows
by the oath taker in his life.

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