

RECEPTION OF SOME ASPECTS OF THE HIPPOCRATIC MEDICAL ETHICS IN ANTIQUITY

PIOTR ASZYK

Pontifical Theological Faculty, Warsaw

Abstract. The Hellenic medical ideas have found appreciation among people over centuries. Though the initial concept remained the same, methods or ways to achieve desired aims have changed. Since Hippocrates, new generations of physicians have worked hard to find more powerful types of therapies to relieve their patients and make treatment less burdensome. The struggle of medicine is very specific and requires, apart from practical skills, a clear personal commitment to help people wisely. From the Early Antiquity, both medicine and medical ethics go together. Wherever Hippocratic medicine is practiced, an appropriate moral pattern accompanies it because the Hellenic doctor offered purely clinical data and his art should not be separated from anthropology, ethics and religion.

Ancient medicine is almost always associated with the legendary Hippocrates of Cos (c. 460-377 BC), the founder of Hellenic medicine. His ideas were very popular in Antiquity. Various writers, not necessarily connected directly to the medical profession, quoted this noble physician, using his authority on specific problems. For instance, Hippocrates appeared in Plato's (c. 427-347 BC) dialogues *Protagoras* and *Phaedrus*. The Greek doctor was also mentioned in Aristotle's *Politics*. There is no doubt that Cornelius Celsus (c. 53-7 AD), the author of the monumental work *De medicina*, called Hippocrates *the oldest authority* (Spencer 1935, p. 189) and *the father of all medical art* (Celsus 1935, p. 295). Another testimony came later from the famous Roman physician Galen (c. 129-199/216 AD) who described Hippocrates as „the first of all physicians and philosophers” (Galen 1952, p. 233). The specific character of the Hippocratic approach to the service of people in need survived throughout the centuries as the most important and

exemplary for all caregivers. This article attempts to give a closer look at the opinions of four authors who mentioned this ancient physician and passed his medical tradition on to the posterity. These authors also dealt with the specific problem whether to introduce or withhold therapy, which appeared in the course of clinical practice.

I. Hippocratic medical ethics – a few basic ideas

Hippocrates continued a long family tradition where medical knowledge and skills were handed down from generation to generation. But this was much more than the enterprise of only a single household. Hippocrates was a respected physician; moreover, he taught medicine and developed a theory of diseases based on four main bodily fluids (blood, black bile, phlegm, yellow bile) (Poter 1999, pp. 55-59). Hippocrates was considered the author of the so called *Corpus Hippocraticum*, a collection of about seventy texts; today we know that these were written over a period of five centuries. According to ancient customs, various authors or scribes used famous names to make their own work more popular (Jonsen 2000, p. 2). The *Corpus Hippocraticum* is a complex collection, which contains philosophical works (e.g. *The Art*) or even strict clinical textbooks (e.g. *Epidemics*). By studying and comparing the Hippocratic approach to medicine, we may notice its rational, rather than supernatural or magical, character (Poter 1999, p. 56).

Today, the most popular text related to Hippocrates is *The Oath*. It shapes basic ethical frameworks for medical workers as well as describing the duties and privileges involved in belonging to the medical profession. This ethical landmark clearly sets out a doctor's responsibility for a patient in particular areas of treatment. *The Oath* exemplifies how a physician should behave in order to respect his teacher and other fellow doctors within the medical community. The text instructs how to deal with typical clinical situations demanding a highly moral, upright and confidential attitude, i.e. a doctor must never administer poison, abuse a patient, and he must keep secrets (Hippocrates 1995a, pp. 299-301). Moreover, in the whole *Corpus Hippocraticum* there is a number of lists of attributes which „the dignity of physician requires” (Hippocrates 1995b, p. 301).

The logic of the professional approach demands that clinical facts be considered prior to medical procedure. A doctor should be a person of virtuous and honest character who acts precisely according to *lege artis*. He is, most importantly, the *servant of the Art* (Hippocrates 1972, p. 165). The

Art which has a long tradition – „Life is short, the Art long” (Hippocrates 1998, p. 99), as can be read at the beginning of the *Aphorisms* – and offers mankind the unique opportunity to fight diseases and other ills which destroy human well-being. Every misuse of the Art damages the reputation of the whole craft (Philips 1973, pp. 114-115). The Art itself has quasi sacral character, so there is an almost devotional attitude towards the profession inside the medical circle. The activity of one physician may finally support or undermine the work of others. Only critical reasoning can be accepted during therapy. Once initiated a treatment must be continued till the end, and no physician may withdraw it. In the *Hippocratic Collection* (Temkin 1991, p. 9), the withholding of treatment is regarded as like the defection of the soldier (Jouanna 1999, p. 140). So a quack can be distinguished from a professional doctor, because the latter takes medicine seriously and respects all the rules of medicine (Edelstein 1967, pp. 323-324). The doctor’s duty is to know the limits of the profession and to never cross them, and to use treatment to help the sick according to his best abilities and judgment, „but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing” (Hippocrates 1995, p. 229). Therapeutic actions should be introduced if they can improve the patient’s condition, otherwise they should never be considered (Sigerist 1961, p. 229).

The treatise *The Art* shows precisely the three tasks fundamental to medicine – „to do away with the sufferings of the sick, to lessen the violence of their diseases, and to refuse to treat those who are overmastered by their diseases, realizing that in such cases medicine is powerless” (Hippocrates 1992, p. 193). The last statement was certainly a controversial one because the author afterwards insists that there are some *who blame medicine because of those who refuse to undertake desperate cases* (Hippocrates 1992, p. 203).

The *Epidemics* is one of the oldest writings in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* to discuss various clinical problems – forty-two examples of diseases of which twenty-five lead to death. But the most interesting is a digression about the methodology of medicine. „Declare the past, diagnose the present, foretell the future; practise these acts. As to diseases, make a habit of two things – to help, or at least to do not harm. The art has three factors, the disease, the patient, the physician. The physician is the servant of the art – as we have already noted – The patient must co-operate with the physician in combating the disease” (Hippocrates 1972, p. 165). These ideas were not further developed in this text, and the author resumed the monotony of clinical discourse, but the quoted sentence „to help, or at least to do no

harm” was later translated into a slightly modified Latin version as *primum non nocere*, which became a main rule for European medical ethics. However, according to Albert Jonsen, Galen, the Roman physician at first felt offended and insulted by this „medical commandment”, but later changed his mind after discovering how incompetent were his contemporary fellow doctors (Jonsen 2000, p. 2).

A very practical „commandment” can be found in the *Aphorisms*: „it is better to give no treatment in cases of hidden cancer; treatment causes speedy death, but to omit treatment is to prolong life” (Hippocrates 1931, p. 189). This opinion does not need many comments, but it is interesting that this Hippocratic advice has been repeated through the centuries by many thinkers who were not physicians. For example, Cicero (106-43 BC) in his letter to Atticus admits that even Hippocrates insisted that in hopeless cases medicine is useless¹. (This opinion was used outside of a medical context, which could be interpreted as showing that specific Hippocratic ideas were widely known among laymen.)

A reference to the same Hippocratic advice can be found also in Augustine of Hippo’s (354-430) *City of God*. He describes Innocentia, a devout woman from Carthage.

She had cancer in one of her breasts, a disease which, as physicians say, is incurable. Ordinarily, therefore, they either amputate, and so separate from the body the member on which the disease has seized, or, that the patient’s life may be prolonged a little, though death is inevitable even if somewhat delayed, they abandon all remedies, following, as they say, the advice of Hippocrates. This the lady we speak of had been advised to by a skillful physician, who was intimate with her family; and she betook herself to God alone by prayer (...). Finally, she was miraculously cured. The physician who had advised her to apply no remedy if she wished to live a little longer, when he had examined her after this, and found that she who, on his former examination, was afflicted with that disease was now perfectly cured, eagerly asked her what remedy she had used, anxious, as we may well believe, to discover the drug which should defeat the decision of Hippocrates. But then she told him what had happened. (Augustine of Hippo 1980, p. 693).

This example provides some insights into the attitudes of ancient practitioners. The confusion of the said physician proves the strong authority of

¹ (...) *desperatis etiam Hippocrates vetat adhibere medicinam*. (M. T. Ciceronis, *Epistolarum ad Atticum* 16.15, in E.O. Winstedt 1918, *Cicero Letters to Atticus with an English Translation*, vol. III, p. 424.)

Hippocrates in hopeless cases, and, again, the idea seems to be commonly accepted and well-known. Later in this article more examples from referring to the Aphorism will be shown.

II. Cornelius Celsus

Cornelius Celsus is the author of the encyclopedic work titled *Artes* which collected ancient knowledge concerning rhetoric, jurisprudence, philosophy, the military arts etc. Out of a number of volumes only eight devoted exclusively to medicine have survived. This Roman writer was not a physician himself, perhaps he was only an editor of this work which collected information about the theory and practice of the art of healing (Poter 1999, pp. 70-71).

According to Celsus medicine has a clear task. It is a discipline which promises health to the sick as *agriculture promises nourishment to healthy bodies* (Celsus 1935, p. 3). The homeland of medicine is Greece where generations cultivated this Art. In the beginning medicine was not an independent discipline. „We find that many who professed philosophy became experts in medicine, the most celebrated being Pythagoras, Empedocles and Democritus. But it was, as some believe, a pupil of the last, Hippocrates of Cos, a man first and foremost worthy to be remembered, notable both for professional skill and for eloquence, who separated this branch of learning from the study of philosophy” (Celsus 1935, p. 5). So Hippocrates made an important step and because of him medicine was governed according to its own terms. Consequently, in the process of development three specializations were established – dietetics, pharmacy and surgery. Medicine ought to respect the wisdom of predecessors. Celsus confessed that he *did not hesitate to make use of the authority of ancient men, and especially of Hippocrates; for although more recent practitioners have made some changes in methods of treatment, they allow none the less that the ancients prognosticated best* (Celsus 1935, p. 85).

There are a lot of mentions of Hippocrates in Celsus' *De Medicina*. For instance, he insisted that „the Art of Medicine ought to be rational, but to draw instruction from evident causes, all obscure ones being rejected from the practice of the Art, although not from the practitioner's study” (Celsus 1935, p. 41). Practical application of these ideas can be found in the fifth book *De medicina* [On Medicine]. There are various descriptions of wounds dealt with by practitioners. Sometimes pharmaceutical treatment is better

however there are cases where surgical interventions are preferable (Celsus 1935, p. 66). A skillful physician should recognize what kind of wound he is dealing with. There are incurable wounds, wounds difficult to cure, and wounds easy to cure. But therapy has its limits, so „it is the part of a prudent man first not to touch a case he cannot save” (Celsus 1935, p. 66). Medicine should be administered properly to each particular case or should never be offered.

If there is, in spite of the serious state of a patient, even a slight hope of curing a sick person, a physician, before taking any action, has to inform the patient about the limited chances of improving his health, because diseases can be stronger than the Art. The procedure mentioned should protect a doctor from accusations of ignorance or error, in cases of a patient’s death. This general statement is followed by examples of mortal wounds, where no medicine can help at all (Celsus 1935, p. 67).

Among numerous possible measures taken by medicine some are disqualified, because they are cruel. Also every excessively painful kind of therapy, as well as every dangerous procedure which might end a patient’s life, is prohibited from a moral point of view and is considered a crime. Medicine has to use less drastic therapies (Celsus 1935, pp. 22-25, 40). Celsus’ concept of medicine has a strongly Hippocratic character if we look at his model of the relationship between a doctor and a patient. The background of clinical data shows physicians as people who are not only professional and skillful in the service of healing, but who are also strongly motivated and full of compassion.

III. Scribonius Largus

Another Roman author who made reference to the Hippocratic medical tradition was Scribonius Largus (c. 1-50 AD). Born in Sicily, he learned the medical art from Greek doctors working there. (Poter 1999, p. 70). He was probably the personal physician to the Roman Emperor Claudius and his wife Valeria Messalina. In the year 43 Scribonius Largus accompanied Claudius on his expedition to Britain. Between the year 44 and 48, when he returned, he wrote *Compositiones* (Scribonii Largi 1983). Initially the text was prepared in Greek but later was partially translated into Latin. His aim was to prove that pharmaceuticals had priority in therapy (Edelstein 1967, p. 337). The work consisted of two-hundred and seventy-one pharmaceutical prescriptions and was used in households as a handbook for domestic

treatment (Pellegrino & Pellegrino 1988, pp. 24-29). Apart from strict clinical descriptions, one could find here some clear ethical standards for physicians. The moral precepts given in the *Compositiones* defer to the authority of Hippocrates, and are the first ever to quote Latin translations of sentences taken from the *Oath* (Carrick 2001, pp. 85, 174).

Scribonius Largus claimed that pharmacology was the most important part of medicine. Patients preferred pharmaceutical remedies to surgical interventions. Medicines are like the hands of gods. Unfortunately doctors undervalue the good effects of these non-invasive methods. Some physicians show their ignorance in their medical practice. There is no excuse for those who fail to achieve the knowledge necessary to serve well. Others, in spite of qualifications, openly oppose the use of pharmaceutical treatment without just reason. They are worse than the previous group, because they cultivate prejudice, of which any medical environment should be free. In his book, the Roman doctor accuses them of lacking compassion and human solidarity – two vices hated by every man of virtue (Scribonii Largi 1983, pp. 1-2).

The high standard of a physician's moral behavior is set by Scribonius Largus. According to doctors' ethical commitment, one cannot offer any harmful drug even to enemies. Moreover, in a battlefield or when at a state of war, doctor's duties cannot be compromised. Every patient must be treated with respect according to the medical code. Doctor-patient relationships are unique in their nature and take priority over any military or state duties (Scribonii Largi 1983, p. 2). Medicine does not value people by their wealth or social status, but without bounds it offers help to every needy person. Anyone approaching a doctor should not fear or expect any danger (Scriboni Largi 1983, p. 3).

IV. Isidore of Pelusium

A few centuries later we find another interesting mentioning of Hippocratic rules in one of the letters of Isidore of Pelusium (c. 360-435 AD). According to historians, he was the pupil of John Chrysostom and lived as a monk in a small village of Pelusium not far from Alexandria². He is known as the most significant epistler of Christian antiquity and his voluminous correspondence consists of about two thousand letters (Quasten 1960, pp. 180-

² *Apoftegmaty Ojców Pustyni* 366-371, Warszawa 1986, pp. 166-167

185). In one of them he criticizes a bishop who applied Hippocratic rule to reject therapy in a hopeless case of presbyter named Zosimo. Even if Hippocratic aphorism may be used with reference to the sick (in a physical sense), however – argues the monk – there is a significant amount of proof that this is wrong, because many doctors managed to cure patients who were seriously ill. In spirituality this rule cannot be taken into account, for a lot of fallen people change their life into a virtuous and exemplary one (Isidore of Pelusium 1864, p. 519).

This letter is evidence that Hippocrates was known among Early Christians. Isidore of Pelusium does not trust the opinion of the Greek thinker. He seems familiar with the opinion of the doctor from Cos, easily interprets it, and finally disagrees with the whole concept. His experience or experience of his contemporary doctors allowed him to reach opposite conclusions from those of Hippocrates. Isidore was more interested in measuring medicine and spiritual life properly. He could not easily transfer medical theories to save human soul. Opinions of Isidore of Pelusium were first to undermine Hippocratic view to refuse therapy in difficult and desperate cases – however it came from somebody who was not a practitioner himself.

V. Isidore of Seville

Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) is recognized as the last of great Latin Fathers of the Church and the last of ancient Christian Philosophers. He was not a physician himself, but he tried, among other Early Christian thinkers, to grasp general concept of medicine. He did it in his twenty volume monumental work *Etymologiarum sive Originum* which is a compendium of pre-Christian and Christian science and culture (Tixeront 1929, pp. 367-371; W.G. Rusch 1977, pp. 199-200). The fourth book of the mentioned magnum opus is titled *De Medicina*.

Medicine – according to Isidore of Seville – „either protects or restores bodily health: its subject matter deals with diseases and wounds” (Isidore of Seville 1964, p. 55). The founder and discoverer of this art was Apollo, then Aesculapius developed it, but, because of misuse of the Art, medicine was hidden or forbidden for five hundred years. Suddenly Hippocrates restored this noble profession to mankind. Those three ancient figures are related to three approaches to medicine: of the Methodists, Empiricists and Logicians (Isidore of Seville 1911). Greek and pagan origin of the Art did not discourage Christians from using and exploring it. Bishop of Seville

quoted two biblical examples of using medicine: one example by prophet Isaiah, and the second by Apostle Paul (Isidore of Seville 1911, 4.9.1). Isidore of Seville proposed a model of medicine which did not differ from concepts of Hippocrates or Cornelius Celsus. He divided diseases into acute and chronic, and he described various kinds of symptoms and remedies, similarly as other medical writers did it before him.

De Medicina shows that the art of healing in the seventh century was still faithful to its Hellenistic roots. The book is an encyclopedic synthesis of medicine and there is nothing original, which was not mentioned earlier. But what seems interesting for our study is a description of cancer. According to Isidore of Seville, „physicians say that it is a wound which admits of cure by no medications, and for this reason they usually cut off the member in which cancer has arisen from the body, so that [the patient] may live a little longer. In truth, yet death will come from it, although a little later” (Isidore of Seville 1964, 4.8.14). The surgical intervention is acknowledged in such case as a typical medical procedure. Presumably, the author of *Etymologiarum sive Originum* simply repeated a common opinion of contemporary physicians (Sharpe 1964, p. 35). It corresponds with the Hippocratic aphorism but it offers a fresh look at the idea of the Hellenic doctor. Maybe throughout centuries the science has developed as a result of continuous progress and a better understanding of that disease.

Bishop of Seville highly respected rational and humanistic character of medicine. For instance, a physician should be well educated not only in his own scientific field, but he also „ought to know literature (...) to be able to understand or to explain what he reads” (Isidore of Seville 1964, 4.13.1). The same requirements apply to rhetoric, geometry or astronomy (Isidore of Seville 1964, 4.13.5), because – as Isidore of Seville concludes his remarks – „medicine is called a second philosophy (...) Just as by philosophy the soul, so also by medicine the body is cured” (Isidore of Seville 1964, 4.13.5).

Conclusions

The Hellenic medical ideas have found appreciation among people over centuries. Various physicians and thinkers agreed with the basic concepts of caring and curing ascribed to Hippocrates. Sometimes they were brought up-to-date with the improvement of medicine. Obviously through centuries, people came to better understand a specific relationship which is developed between a doctor and a patient in the process of healing. Though

the initial concept remained the same, methods or ways to achieve desired aims have changed. Since Hippocrates, new generations of physicians have worked hard to find more powerful types of therapies to relieve their patients and make treatment less burdensome.

Every therapy should prevent human suffering and it has always been a determinant of moral evaluation of the taken measure. So on a theoretical level, a unique nature of medicine makes it a science, a rational affair, but in practice – by the patients bedside – it is the Art which requires not only knowledge but, most of all, wisdom. A physician's vocation in its antique prototype was inseparable from the faithfulness to foundations of the Art, the ancient corporate identity claimed permanent engagement like a service of a Roman soldier who swear to defend the Empire even at the cost of his life (Jonsen 2000, p. 10).

The struggle of medicine is very specific and requires, apart from practical skills, a clear personal commitment to help people wisely. From the Early Antiquity, both medicine and medical ethics go together. Wherever Hippocratic medicine is practiced, an appropriate moral pattern accompanies it because the Hellenic doctor offered purely clinical data and his Art should not be separated from anthropology, ethics and religion.

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