

# With Apologies to Hippocrates

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by

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About ten years ago I was working as lead public relations counsel to the Dean of Medicine at a Canadian medical school. Sometime during the course of the first year, the faculty decided that they would once and for all dispense with the traditional recitation of the Hippocratic Oath at convocation. Calling it an anachronism and meaningless to the young doctors of today, they took this move to ditch what has, as much as anything else, been a terrific public relations tool for the medical profession.

## Anachronism or useful tool?

The picture is inspiring. Several hundred newly minted doctors stand just after receiving their diplomas to recite an oath that is some 2000 years old, reputedly written by Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, or one of his students, depending on whose version of history you read. Reworked many times to fit the modern sense of what medicine is and should ethically represent, the oath, while not binding in any way, represents a symbol of a physician's ethical responsibilities.

Critics, of course, take a different view. There is a belief among some that the oath does nothing more than set out the parameters for physicians to protect themselves. Others just think that the very idea is anachronistic.

However, it is still a part of the graduation ceremonies for many medical schools. Indeed, when the faculty at the medical school where I toiled made their move to disassociate themselves from it, the outcry came not from the long-in-the-tooth faculty and clinicians, but from the senior students themselves. When the soon-to-be graduates heard the rumor that they would be denied the opportunity to take it, they lobbied to keep it a part of the ceremony. The Dean asked me for my opinion. From a public relations perspective, I said, it's probably worth keeping in. If the news that the medical school is getting rid of the oath makes it onto a journalist's desk, I said, the opportunity to question a change in basic values would be too good to pass up. And it was clear that the graduates, future

donors to the school would be upset by the change. (Was I being too mercenary?).  
Bottom line: they left it in the ceremony. At that school, anyway.

So, why all this talk about the medical profession's ethics oath to you, the public relations professional?

Why don't we have a PR version of the Hippocratic Oath, I thought? It might be nice to consider the kind of pledge we might make as we enter our chosen field. So, I re-examined the Hippocratic Oath for some guidance and created an Oath for us.

## An ethics oath for PR

### *The Oath of Hermes\**

*I swear* before any Greater Power, my family, my teachers and my peers that I will fulfill to the very best of my ability and judgment the word and spirit of the tenets here below.

*I will respect* the experience and the knowledge passed on to me by those who have taught me my art and those whose experience I have learned from. I promise to do the same by taking advantage of every opportunity to pass on my knowledge to those who are following in my own foot steps.

*I will show* by my words and my actions respect for my peers, teachers, employers, clients, profession and society. I will also do the same for myself.

*I will, for the mutual benefit* of my clients or employers and the publics they serve, apply appropriate methods and avoid whenever possible all those methods that would cause harm to anyone. I will refuse to take actions at the behest of employers or clients that I know would be harmful.

*I will be truthful* in my communications and never knowingly mislead. At the same time, I will keep private all matters of a confidential nature and will weigh carefully the need for public honesty against the need for confidentiality.

*I will work to prevent* client or employer communication and public relation problems whenever possible. I will maintain a high level of competence in my work so that my advice will be of benefit.

*I will take care* in my personal relationships and dealings so as to avoid both conflicts of interest and the perception of them.

In all matters I will act with integrity and trustworthiness, seeking opportunities to do good whenever possible.

While I continue to keep this Oath inviolate, may I live continue to enjoy both my personal and professional life.

## What it means to us

In some senses, this says that we ought to consider following the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But that's a very simplistic distillation of ethics. Perhaps, then, the real value of such an oath is to make each of us think about our own behavior and our moral standards. I believe that thinking about ethics this way is just a way for me to indicate my commitment to personal integrity and a set of higher ideals – and remember, they are just that – ideals. We might fall short from time to time, but we need to have something to aim for.

\* I had to find a name for this oath since we PR practitioners don't really have any champion historical Greeks, unless you consider the various rhetoricians of the time. So I called it after Hermes, messenger of the gods, much like we are messengers in our own work.

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