



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Lithotomy's prohibition and referral to experts in medical oaths of hippocratic stemma[☆]



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Abstract

Objective: The aim is to analyze how the Hippocratic Oath's commitments of not cutting for stone and referral to experts was modified in medical oaths of Hippocratic stemma from different time periods.

Methods: Nineteen oaths of Hippocratic stemma were studied: 4 Medieval, 2 Modern, and 13 Contemporary. They were selected according to: name of the oath when it includes the word "Hippocratic" or because their authors recognized having based their oaths on the Hippocratic Oath. Their historical significance and representativity regarding time period, renowned medical schools, and importance and reliability of the sources was also taken into consideration. **Results:** Four oaths prohibit cutting for stone (one Medieval, two Modern, one Contemporary); 4 oaths mention seeking consultation about patients (all Contemporary); 3 mention not performing criminal operations (all Contemporary); 8 do not mention these commitments (3 Medieval, 5 Contemporary).

Conclusion: The commitment of the Hippocratic Oath of not cutting for stone and referral to experts has been modified mainly in Contemporary oaths. The original commitment seems to have been split into 2 tendencies: those that mention obtaining consultation, and those that refer to not performing criminal operations. Due to the bioethics movement in the second half of the 20th century, referring patients that exceed the physician's limitations to more skilled colleagues constitutes an ethical obligation. Thus, it should be a commitment present in every Contemporary oath.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

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Prohibición de la litotomía y derivación a expertos en los juramentos médicos de la genealogía hipocrática**Resumen**

Objetivo: Analizar cómo el compromiso del juramento hipocrático de no usar el cuchillo en quienes tienen cálculos y derivar a estos pacientes a expertos fue modificado en juramentos médicos de la genealogía (stemma) hipocrática de diferentes épocas.

Métodos: Diecinueve juramentos de stemma hipocrática fueron estudiados: 4 medievales, 2 modernos y 13 contemporáneos. Los juramentos fueron seleccionados de acuerdo con el nombre de los mismos cuando incluían el término «hipocrático» o porque sus autores reconocieron haberse basado en el Juramento Hipocrático. También se tuvo en cuenta la significación y representatividad en relación con el período histórico, escuelas médicas de renombre, importancia y confiabilidad de las fuentes.

Resultados: Cuatro juramentos prohíben operar el cálculo (uno medieval, dos modernos, uno contemporáneo); 4 juramentos mencionan buscar consejo en relación con pacientes (contemporáneos), 3 hacen referencia a no realizar operaciones criminales (contemporáneos); 8 no hacen mención a estos compromisos (3 medievales, 5 contemporáneos).

Conclusión: El compromiso del juramento hipocrático de no usar el cuchillo en quienes tienen cálculos y derivarlos a expertos ha sido modificado principalmente en los juramentos contemporáneos. La prohibición original parece haberse dividido en 2 tendencias: aquellos juramentos que mencionan el pedir consejo, y aquellos que refieren no realizar operaciones criminales. Debido al movimiento bioético de la segunda mitad del siglo xx, derivar a colegas más idóneos a aquellos pacientes que exceden las limitaciones del médico constituye una obligación ética. Por lo tanto, es un compromiso que debería estar presente en todos los juramentos contemporáneos.

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Introduction

The Hippocratic Oath is one of the first documents of medical ethics in the Western World. It comprises guidelines regarding how to behave with teachers, pupils, and patients. Nevertheless, the true original meaning of some of its commitments may never be fully comprehended. There have been different translations and interpretations of the oath throughout history, and scholars have proposed different hypotheses about the significance of its clauses, particularly in the last century.¹⁻³ One of the most controversial is the clause regarded as "the prohibition of lithotomy". Authors have translated it differently: Miles, translating Emile Littré expresses "I will not practice surgery for stone; I will leave this to people who do that".³ Ludwig Edelstein expresses it as: "I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favour of such men as they are engaged in this work".² Controversy lays, firstly, in the type of lithiasis involved, whether gallbladder, kidney or bladder stones.³ Secondly, whether Greek physicians recommended staying away from all types of surgery, as Edelstein proposes, or only lithotomy or castration, as Nittis and Littré suggest.^{3,4} Given the particularity of this technique and its description in the Hippocratic Oath, authors like Bloom consider urology as the first surgical subspecialty.⁵

Many interpretations over the years were provided to explain what the commitment of not cutting for stone and the referral to experts in the Hippocratic Oath really meant.

It is known that Hippocratic physicians performed surgical procedures.³ Why then would there be a need to prohibit lithotomy?

Vesical lithiasis is one of the oldest pathologies known. Since this was a health problem that generated great pain to those who suffered from it, it became the object of many violent treatments such as surgery, which carried a high mortality rate. Lithotomy is the oldest surgical technique known for a specific pathology.⁶

Being that this commitment was particularly specific to a certain procedure, it became anachronical. The procedure suffered modifications through the centuries and with improvements to the technique. Therefore, it ceased causing numerous deaths and other complications.

Nowadays, some authors believe that the commitment of not cutting for stone and referral to experts could be interpreted as recognizing the physician's own limitations and seeking referrals to more skilled colleagues and specialists in certain pathologies.⁷

Thus, it would be important to analyze this commitment in medical oaths with Hippocratic influence. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze how the commitments of not cutting for stone and referrals to experts were modified in medical oaths of Hippocratic stemma from different time periods. The intention of this study is not to provide a new translation or interpretation of the Hippocratic Oath. The Hippocratic Oath and its discussion by scholars is mentioned merely to introduce the topic to the reader and

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