

Are medical oaths still relevant?

A Pilot Study



Maimonides: Jewish Rabbi born in the 12th Century accredited with writing the 'Prayer of Maimonides', from which the Oath of Maimonides is taken.

Background

Doctors have long been viewed as belonging to a 'profession' underpinned by particular values, designed to motivate excellence, guide behaviours and facilitate public trust in the medical community. The concept of professionalism has directed advancements in medicine and defined the boundaries within which medical practice should be undertaken. Modern professional values have tended to come from GMC guidance and health service regulations, with the revalidation system introduced to keep doctors accountable to a minimum standard of professionalism. It has been suggested that a departure from 'nostalgic' ideas of professionalism (1) is necessary, in order to meet the changing demands of modern medicine, with an emphasis being placed on increasing regulation. Yet, historically, medical oaths have had a key role in defining and unifying professional values, seeking to capture an aspirational vision of medicine rather than serving a wholly regulatory function. Such Oaths have influenced both the training and delivery of medical practice for centuries. Indeed, certain medical schools still encourage students to construct their own 'mission statement', comparing the degree to which these align with the values enshrined within traditional Oaths such as the 'Hippocratic Oath' and the 'Prayer of Maimonides'.(2) Moreover, the association between the medical profession and the centrality of an oath remains strong in the public perception, as evidenced by recent suggestions that the teaching and banking professions should follow the medical paradigm by producing comparable aspiration oaths, applicable to their respective roles in society.(3,4)

Aims

- To explore what motivates the values of professionalism amongst specialty doctors in palliative medicine
- To consider the relevance of medical oaths to daily practice.

Method

A qualitative Study using focus groups with Specialty Doctors in Palliative Medicine (n=6) recruited from 2 hospice organisations. These were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule, enquiring as to what motivates each participant to be a 'good doctor,' what role the GMC guidance has and what role medical oaths have. Towards the end of the schedule, participants viewed a copy of the 'prayer of Maimonides' as a relatively unknown medical oath, before reflecting upon it. Analysis was undertaken using inductive thematic analysis. Ethical approval for the study was granted by University of Birmingham

Interview schedule

- What motivates you to be a palliative care doctor?
- What motivates you to be a good palliative care doctor?
- What role do the GMC 'duties of a doctor' play in your everyday practice? Do you find them motivating? In what way?
- Did you swear an oath at your graduation?
- What do you think about the practice of taking an oath at graduation? Do you think it has any relevance to the practice of modern medicine?
- Do oaths have a role in motivating your palliative medicine practice?
- Show participants Oath of Maimonides
- Considering the Oath of Maimonides, do you think this oath is applicable to your daily practice? In what way?

Results

"I hated the feeling of impotence that I used to have when I was more junior, home visits, when you really felt like there was more to know and more that could be done and it was just personal, that you hadn't learnt it yet, so that's what makes me want to be good."

"I think it's just something innate. I don't think it's anything else, it's your nature."

"I'm more interested in the encounter and the relationship that one can build up with the human beings"

Theme 1
Everyday Experience: Innate Professionalism

1. The Human Connection
2. Inner Drive / moral imperative
3. Fear of failure / incompetence
4. A Nurturing Team

"There is a level that is set by your peers as well. That nourishes that environment, that environment kind of, you adorn to it"

"I'm more comfortable from the public point of view that they have something they can look up"

"That's the basics for my medicine and then I need to achieve, for me, more than that."

Theme 2
Regulatory Awareness: Demand Professionalism

1. Public accountability
2. Disciplinary function
3. GMC document as occasional point of reference

"I suppose it is relevant, so that you can get called up to the GMC or you can get struck off."

"It gives a sort of level of service and responsibility. But, I don't think they motivate me"

"the biggest motivation in the oath is our responsibility to do no harm isn't it"

"I have never ever been presented with any sort of oath"

"I don't think there is anything outdated about it, except perhaps the practice of making oaths"

Theme 3
Marginalisation of Oaths: Cultural Professionalism

1. Culturally conspicuous
2. Moment in time
3. Do no harm

"it just added to the gravitas of that moment"

"I'm afraid for me it is just a public myth that we all swear this thing."

"So it's a recurrent and sort of re-justification of what you are trying to do"

"I think it does such a huge amount to just draw medicine together"

"I think it is beautiful. I'd love to think that's how I got up and thought about my day ahead."

"I think it encompasses what I'd like to be doing. It made me think maybe this is something we should say or share at the beginning of the day."

Theme 4
Oaths and Connection: Elevating Professionalism

1. Continuity with medical community across time
2. Heart of medicine - Maimonides
3. Motivating character

"I think the attitude of humility and reverence that it is creating perhaps and asking us to hold for other human beings is a wonderful thing to just return to"

Conclusion

This study suggests that amongst the multiple motivators to medical professionalism, medical oaths have relevance as a uniquely powerful motivator, capturing the essence of the medical endeavour and providing the profession with continuity to its historical roots. Though only 4 of the 6 participants had ever sworn an oath, all reported an appreciation for the 'prayer of Maimonides' as an inspiring mandate for the work of a doctor. Far from being nostalgic, Oaths have the tendency to encourage aspiration towards a particular paradigm of medicine, which this study suggests may be a more compelling motivator than regulation alone. Further study is required to determine whether this view is peculiar to doctors of a particular specialty and grade.

References

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