

# Hippocrates Upended: A Cause for Reevaluation of the American Physician

By Donald J. Prolo, M.D.

What the earthquake of 1906 did to the Bay Area, World War II in 1941 and the advent of Medicare in 1965 did to the American physician. Let us look at the parallels. Before Hippocrates, physicians could be hired as assassins to do in an enemy or facilitate the premature demise of a parent for early inheritance. Now physicians are paid to perform according to the bureaucratic formulas and edicts of the federal government, business groups, insurance companies, HMOs and IPAs. Lost in this third-party deluge of financial forces is the primacy, prestige and freedom of a properly educated and licensed physician to act and advocate entirely for the patient, as well as the patient's freedom to choose a physician and to expect that physician to honor a sacred bond of trust. American medicine has been reduced to considerations of what percent of gross domestic product can be spent on healthcare, how many forms can reasonably be completed before a third party will pay, whether an insurer will allow an assistant at surgery, and how fast a patient can be rushed through an examination or discharged from the hospital.

The impact of these exactions on the value of both the patient and the physician is enormous. Our contemporary ethos is to devalue patients, their physicians, and their bond of trust in order to legitimize payer coercion. The patient becomes a pawn, the doctor becomes a wage slave, and both lose their freedom to aspire to and achieve their highest hopes and calling.

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If the dignity and stature of physicians are not universally idealized societal values, then patients cannot be healed. A sick, fragile human, ravaged by physical and/or emotional illness, surrenders himself or herself to the mercy and unmitigated loyalty of a physician. This experience is *not* analogous to standing in line awaiting service from a bank teller or a grocery clerk. This profound act of self-exposure and trust by a patient to the skills and mercy of a physician is a difference in kind from all other human interactions, *not* a difference in degree.

## Hippocrates Upended (cont'd)

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Societies do not grant this privilege casually: Consider the rigorous and prolonged educational process, national board examinations, licensure, specialty training, specialty board certification, and maintenance of certification and recertification. Paradoxically, the federal government and its echoing chorus of commercial business and payers now expect the physicians to behave as drones, groveling annually to the Congress for their share of a diminishing handout. The fact is that it is only collectively through our professional associations that we can respond in an effective manner.

It has been stated, “Medicine is, at its center, a moral enterprise grounded in a covenant of trust. This covenant obliges physicians to be competent and to use their competence in the patient’s interests. Today, this covenant of trust is significantly threatened. By its traditions and very nature, medicine is a special kind of human activity—one that cannot be pursued effectively without the virtues of humility, honesty, intellectual integrity, compassion and effacement of excessive self-interest. Our first obligation must be to serve the good of those persons who seek our help and trust us to provide it.” “Ask not what organized medicine can do for you; ask what we can do for our patients.” The strangulating grip of third-party influence destroying health care over financing issues must be broken.

Let us insist on *reevaluation* of the American physician as the cornerstone critical to the healing power of physicians.

Let us pledge *eternal warfare* against influences and health systems that violate our calling.

Let us renew our *commitment to the 2,400-year-old Oath of Hippocrates*, immortalizing the patient-physician covenant.

*Donald Prolo, M.D., is a neurosurgeon practicing in San Jose, California. He is the past president of the California Association of Neurologic Surgeons and the president of the Santa Clara County Medical Association. He also serves on the Executive Committee of the Specialty Delegation to the California Medical Association.*

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1   Crawshaw R, Rogers DE, Pellegrino ED, Bulger RJ, Lundberg GD, Bristow LR, Cassel CK, Barondess JA. Patient-Physician Covenant *JAMA* 1995;273:1553.