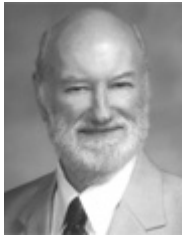




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### Re-Revising Hippocrates



By John Loofbourow, MD

*“No one in this world, so far as I know...has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people.” — H. L. Mencken*

The Hippocratic Oath commands that the physician consider his teacher’s family as his own; do no harm in treating patients; defer to specialists where surgery is concerned; abstain from sexual seduction of/by patients; and never divulge the secrets of the medical profession to the public.

Since 1948 it has been repeatedly revised by the World Medical Association, adding more modern commandments, including:

- Service to Humanity;
- Respect for ”secrets” confided by patients;
- Non-discrimination by age, disease, disability, creed, ethnicity, gender, nationality, political affiliation, race, sexual orientation, or social standing;
- A carefully but vaguely defined ”respect” for human life; and
- Not using medical knowledge to violate human rights or civil liberties, (whatever those terms may mean.)

In the U.S., other ethical maxims are often declared sacrosanct, such as:

- Medical care is a human right, properly guaranteed by the state.
- Any human life is priceless, so cost is irrelevant.

The problem is then obvious, because no one, and no state, can provide unlimited medical care to everyone. The inevitable necessity to limit medical care is what fuels our national debate today, and brings idealistic populist ethical standards into question.

Despite much noxious misinformation from conflicting powerful self-interested parties, the U.S. medical care debate will, I feel, ultimately be constructive, positive and, in a word, healthy. We are undergoing a transformative process forced upon us by technologic progress. (Yet when has it been otherwise? That is the nature of life.)

Our debate, fortunately, is made more honest, open, and productive by yet another technologic development:

the uncontrolled exchange of ideas and information on the internet. Bypassing the hereditary bias of old media, over time the public is perfectly able to sort truth from half truth or lies, emotion from reason, and collectively reach the best conclusion.<sup>1</sup>

This is why the free exchange of ideas is feared by power, and by government everywhere, even here. That is why so many totalitarian governments restrict, or control the internet, as for example, but not limited to, China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba.

Our national dilemma is that technology offers limitless possibility, while human limitations are inadequate to fulfill all our needs or expectations.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, we are, I believe, in an incomparably privileged position to transform our national medical care, even though there is no way to provide everything for everyone. Unfortunately we cannot successfully adopt or adapt a ready made import for health care.

Why? The U.S. is not comparable to any other country; that is why the many comparisons often made are simply vacuous. They are all true lies. For example, it is iterated *ad nauseum* that the U.S. pays more per capita for health care than any other nation but lags behind most industrialized nations on any accepted standard of health care. The UN, to the contrary, rates the U.S. as first among 190 nations in responsiveness to the needs and choices of individual patients. Is it any wonder we are undecided about abandoning the system?

The U.S. is, well, our own unique people and country. No nation with so many resources, and so large and diverse a people as ours could address the complex issue of 21st century medical care in such a productive, universal, and public manner.

We are still a relatively wealthy, open, civil society. While many of us are not great readers, nor great intellects, we are not all stupid. Given open access to information of all sorts, and free debate, any people's collective wisdom in making decisions outperforms that of the educated, the wise, the powerful, privileged, and the best informed.

Provided we can protect our democracy, despite its defects, and if the public debate over medical care is allowed to continue to a reasoned conclusion, our resulting decisions will effectively provide the best health care possible, considering our strengths, and limitations. I think we should be thankful that the debate has been resuscitated. But we must not be stampeded for the benefit of someone's name, fame, or legacy.<sup>3</sup>

Let's continue the discussion, speak up, and listen, and together decide on the future of medicine in this fortunate land.

Hippocrates, roll over.

Again. Get used to it, man.

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1. See James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, 0-385-72170-6
2. See the Unabomber. His manifesto is on line: voluminous, ranting, but interesting. He feared Big Tech

would ruin our world, our lives, shut us off from our real selves. To the contrary it has amplified our lives, our potential, and our world; but we ourselves are hard put to use it wisely or even understand its potential.

3. For a taste of the eloquence and the urgency of the argument, google Ezekiel Emmanuel. For the past 10 or more years he is read everywhere that matters, a powerful, gifted writer, and a man in a hurry. Impressive. But hey, Zeke. Easy. Your separate and equal colleagues and citizens want to participate. Even if we ain't on your Big Stage we may be able to contribute; and if we feel we are heard will more willing to accept the Change.