

Why Hippocrates? A Clash Between Avarice and Morality in Ancient Greek Medical Ethics that Still Resounds

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Dear Editor,

While tracing the origins of Western Medicine, we reach the era of Asclepius (Greek: Ασκληπιός), the great ancient Greek patron of therapeutics in about the 13th century BC. This secondary Thessalian deity was born as a mythical commoner, who became a hero in the ancient city of Trikki and was finally nurtured at the top of Mount Olympus among the gods of Greek antiquity, acquiring a binary form of human and snake (the ancient chthonic symbol of resurrection-rebirth). As all Olympians, he himself had a fatal moral flaw of mortals. Asclepius, and therefore all of his followers-priests, as well as the lineage of physicians who embraced his religion (the Asclepiads), had a strong

affection for gold - a mortal sin which was vividly described by the authors of the era. His whole religion was surprisingly based on rich gifts, *ex-votos* and venality, while his entire sect was fond of huge remuneration. If Asclepius was to perform his medical skills, as a god in any of his forms, human or snake, he had to be highly compensated as Pausanias stated. Thus, this binary divine and early protector of the medical arts depicted the first avaricious figure in the history of medicine (1). Usually, an *ex-voto* was not enough, as the priests demanded enormous amounts of gold, thousands of golden staters from the worshipers, in order for the god to appear and propose a cure, or to send a prescription in distant cases (Greek: Σεσημασμένη δέλτο), or even to resurrect the dead from Hades, provoking the wrath of Zeus. Once Asclepius was summoned to treat Theseus' (Greek: Θησέας) son, Ippolytos (Greek: Ιππόλυτος). To save him from a tragic demise to the Underworld, he requested "gold in hand". When Zeus find this out, "He raised his hand against both and instantaneously cut their breath throughout their chests, sealing with a flaming thunder their end" (2). In Asclepius' prime, in the 5th century BC, a new dogma appeared that changed every aspect of health care. Hippocrates and his followers-pupils introduced a whole new approach, proposing an oath for all medico-philosophers, limiting the

physicians' fees. A compensation was recommended, named "Iatra" (from the Greek word for physician, *iatros*, ἰατρός), a fee which should be paid for any intervention (sometimes as farm animals or fruit, or simply a shelter). The charismatic new doctrine suggested a thrifty way of living for all (both physicians and citizens), while medical and philosophical education, experience and the personalized exercise of medicine, with a holistic approach including both the body and the soul, were introduced as a more humane relationship with sufferers. The clash between theurgic and scientific medicine lasted less than a century in classical Greece. The "Hippocratic Oath" established medical ethics in antiquity and its validity still determines physicians' behaviour globally (3). It was the exaggerated fee of gold of that time that motivated the change, the shift of the society towards a new mode of compensation. In our modern world, where the client's resources are limited and physicians' fees are once again being elevated to a more and more costly commodity, price transparency initiatives encourage patients to save money by choosing physicians with a relatively low price per office visit or intervention. Moreover, studies have proven that the patients of low-price physicians who have substantively lower overall spending compared to the patients of high-price physicians, enjoy equal services (4). Patients are kept in the dark about the going rates for health care services, while the need to "bend the cost curve" has become increasingly urgent over recent decades due to economic instability. Stripped to its core, modern medicine has become a service industry, with financial conflicts of interest which may cloud

clinical judgment and practice, and further burden public health care systems and their users (5). To answer the question concerning the best physician on the basis of his fee, we may recall the stigma left by the Hippocratic School. An educated and experienced physician, regardless of his low cost reward, could treat any disease and be at the same time beneficial to society, equally as someone who demands pricey compensation. If we are called upon to decide between an "Asclepiad" and a "Hippocrates", between avarice and morality, between exaggeration and normality, the answer arises effortlessly. In Ancient Greece Zeus annihilated avarice, while in the modern era all physicians should kill their inner passion themselves in order to serve society better and provide a public service and intergenerational solidarity, by simply remembering the example of the temperate Ancient Greek medico-philosophers.

Conflict of interest: The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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