

***THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE HIPPOCRATIC OR
PHYSICIAN'S OATH
(TE SO-CALLED HIPPOCRATES JUSIURANDUM)***

Motto:

"The doctors' misconception is in thinking
their usefulness is in medications."

(Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness*)

Even if "medical care flows through relationships" (Eric Cassell) and "the spoken word is the most important tool in medicine", (Eric Cassell), many Romanian health care professionals fail to properly communicate with their patients and they seem to forget that it is their duty to alleviate pain, if not cure, and never cause harm in any way.

Based on interviewing the patients from a Neurology section of a major local hospital, the conclusion is that many Romanian health care professionals do not have high regard for manners, understanding and compassion as essential values in caring for the sick and needy.

Interviewed patients felt that neither their medical needs nor their feelings were considered at all and they felt hopeless and powerless in a broken health care system that is too corrupt, inefficient and simply harmful.

What patients most complained about was that physicians, nurses and other health care professionals were/are often either just in a hurry - to finish paperwork, make money, carry on their various tasks - or just plain insensitive to the patients' need to know what is wrong with them, what their diagnosis is, what the course of action may look like.

It seems, therefore, that at least in that hospital, physicians, nurses and other health care professionals failed/fail to understand that feelings are often more important to patients than facts. When facts are clearly being requested, it is usually more comfortable and straightforward to discuss facts after the patient's feelings are known. So, one of the biggest mistakes in talking to patients is making assumptions about what they mean, how they feel and what they need. Or even not even

bothering to care about what patients feel, think, or need.

The failure to communicate demoralized/demoralizes all members of the health-care team, not just the patients. Nurses, asked by patients who find communication with their doctors cut off, found/find themselves in the terrible quandary: They can tell the patient the truth, knowing that this may bring about the physician's wrath as well as perhaps otherwise "get them into trouble"; they can join in the game of charades; or they can simply obfuscate and, in truth, lie to the patient. Thus, open communication among all members of the team is of utmost importance. Also, medical staff should be respectful of each other not just of patients. It seems in the Romanian health care system there is little cooperation and a lot of envious unhealthy competition which also is against a patient's well-being since each specialist will have something negative to say about the other health care specialist the patient just dealt with. Therefore, the patient can barely decide what course of action he or she should follow.

Also, first words are remembered best. First impressions are often difficult to reverse. If time is limited, first words are even more important. Compare "Hello, Mrs. X. I'm Doctor Y. I've come to spend a few minutes to talk with you about your illness" (while preferably sitting down on a nearby chair) to "Hello, I can only spare a few minutes to talk about your illness". The interviewed patients felt that doctors cared more about their conferences and financial situation than about sparing some time really talking with the patients about their diseases. Since first words and first impressions are so important,

some preparation is essential especially before meeting new patients.

Good manners (proper introductions, use of correct names, courtesy, respect for social expectations etc.) are essential. Especially, patients should never be yelled at (as it happened in the hospital in question) and disrespect or disrespectful language should be a basis to terminate someone's career in medicine forever.

Wrong or hurtful words are those spoken without kindness. It is usually the lack of kindness and not the words themselves that cause pain. Our words flow from our attitudes. And it was a certain uncaring and harmful attitude that bothered the interviewed patients most.

Health care professionals also need to know not only how to talk about health issues but also how much. Patients can only be told what patients are ready to hear. Sick people are not, as Eric Cassel put it so beautifully, simply well people caring "the knapsack of disease". They are people in whom a whole host of changes and adaptations are and have been taking place. Simply assaulting patients with the truth is hardly the proper thing to do.

Patients must be gently led to receive bad news about their health. The manner in which this is done varies with the personality of each patient, each health care professional and his or her role, each situation, and the peculiarities of the specific relationship, but it should be done gently, with genuine care and with patience.

Human understanding, rather than technical knowledge, is what is needed. A hurried approach to patients under these circumstances violates the duty of respect. Sitting at the patient's bedside, perhaps sharing a cup of coffee, perhaps touching a shoulder, or an arm, are all appropriate maneuvers that can convert the process from one of mutual pain to one of sharing of mutual mortality.

Health care professionals should not only be able to speak to patients but also listen to them. The good listener (not the bored or the uninvolved listener who open "simply listens" and fails to engage himself or herself) is the one who will be able to accomplish the most for their patient when it comes to dealing with ethical

issues or confronting emotionally trying problems.

Health care professionals should also be able to respect patients' secrets since patients are vulnerable and confide some secrets to health care professionals. These secrets must be respected because secrets can give a person strength.

And finally, respecting one patient is respecting his or her wishes and desires, understanding his or her fears and finally the best way of supporting a patient is to support the patient's family, too.

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Notes:

1. TO BE CONSIDERED AND REFLECTED UPON:
Fragment from the *Hippocratic or Physician's Oath (the so-called Hippocratis Jusiurandum)*:
"I will prescribe such treatment as may be for the benefit of my patients, according to my best power and judgment, and preserve them from anything hurtful or mischievous... I will maintain the purity and integrity of my art..."
2. "ALL GENERALIZATIONS ARE FALSE, INCLUDING THIS ONE" (*Murphy's Laws*)...

Most patients' comments were directed to the inappropriate (and, even more, really harmful) behavior of a certain resident physician, Dr. I. B. (or B. I. - international style of listing names, Christian name first), who is a Specialist Neurologist Physician at the referred to hospital...