



## Beyond tradition: abortion, cancel culture, and the legacy of the Hippocratic Oath

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Received: 2 August 2023 / Accepted: 2 September 2023 / Published online: 23 September 2023  
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**Keywords** Hippocratic Oath · Cancel culture · Medical students · History

Dear Editor,

In many universities around the world, it is still customary to read the original text of the Hippocratic Oath during the graduation ceremony for medical students [1]. The reading of this document holds purely ritualistic and symbolic value and marks a significant step for students on the threshold of entering the medical profession.

It is generally accepted that some sentences of the Hippocratic Oath could be deemed anachronistic nowadays, considering it is a text dated back to 2500 years ago. In particular, it contains some critical passages that have sparked debates among scholars during the centuries, mainly regarding the stance on abortion in ancient medicine. In particular, the original Greek sentence *ὁμοίως δὲ οὐδὲ γυναικὶ πεσσὸν φθόριον δώσω*—that could be literally translated as “similarly I will not give to a woman a destructive pessary”—seems to refer to the prohibition of a specific abortive method (i.e., pessary inserted into vagina) that could cause infectious complications, leading to the death of the woman. This position was consistent with other writings belonging to the Hippocratic School that did not condemn all the form of abortions, but suggested alternative methods to pessaries, so ensuring the safety of women [2]. The fact that pessaries were so dangerous to the health of the women might suggest that Hippocrates may have listed the provision on abortion in the Oath to protect the pregnant woman rather than her potential child [2]. Hippocrates’ position against the use of pessaries may be also interpreted as a recommendation to

his students to leave the application of abortive methods to other healthcare figure, such as midwives, claiming a different dignity and asserting a more prominent role for the physician [2]. Indeed, in the following sentence of the text, Hippocrates similarly recommended his students to not use the knife on patients suffering from (urinary) stones, leaving this intervention to “craftsmen”, i.e., empirical surgeons.

During the centuries, the vague stance on abortion in the Oath has allowed for diverse interpretations, mainly after the advent of Christianity in the Middle Ages. According to De Brabandere, between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, the sentence was transcribed to omit the word “pessary” and to instead state that women should not be given abortifacients, “from above or below” [3]. Furthermore, in some versions, the word “pessary” was also changed to “treatment”, to clearly condemn any type of abortive procedure [3]. Following this tradition, in more recent years, some anti-abortion movement interpreted the Hippocratic Oath to uphold the sanctity of life from conception, reinforcing the view that it forbade all forms of abortions.

Nowadays, reciting of the Hippocratic Oath during the graduation ceremony has become increasingly controversial and the subject of demonstrations and protests by newly graduated students who refuse to read certain passages, particularly those related to abortion. The protests of students against the Hippocratic Oath appear to be a product of what has come to be known, colloquially, as “cancel culture”, which has become a pervasive phenomenon in our society, gained popularity since late 2019. As explained by Forbes Senior Editor Evan Gerstmann, “There is no single accepted definition of cancel culture, but at its worst, it is about unaccountable groups successfully applying pressure to punish someone for perceived wrong opinion” [4]. Most generally, cancel culture refers to a social movement that want to wipe out, eliminate, or “cancel” messages or behavior that contradicts the viewpoints of a modern ideology. Cancel

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culture behavior is a modern form of ostracism and harassment, which is also having an impact on medical research, especially in the field of gender and sexual medicine [5]. Cancel culture has particularly thrived in academia, involving even historical figures who lived hundreds of years ago. Instances of this phenomenon are widespread, including statues that have been toppled, defaced, or removed, mainly in Northern America. In 2019, for example, the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, USA) covered up historic Christopher Columbus murals in its main administration building [6].

Cancel culture, with its pervasive influence in the academic world, could have important implications for medicine and its history, starting from Hippocrates. It prompts a reassessment of historical figures and practices within the field of medicine. Certain medical figures from the past may face criticism or scrutiny due to their association with controversial ideologies, discriminatory practices, or unethical experiments. Cancel culture could influence the interpretation of historical events, leading to revisionist approaches and selective narratives within the history of medicine. Certain aspects of medical history that are deemed offensive or objectionable may be downplayed or excluded from the narrative, potentially distorting a comprehensive understanding of the field. While critical analysis and reassessment are valuable, it is essential to maintain a balanced view that acknowledges the complexities of historical medical practices. Cancel culture can create an environment where controversial ideas and diverse perspectives within the history of medicine are silenced or marginalized. Historians of medicine may hesitate to explore topics or theories that challenge prevailing norms or that could be perceived as offensive, resulting in a narrowing of perspectives and limiting the exploration of alternative viewpoints. This suppression of ideas inhibits the full exploration of medical history and hampers intellectual growth within the field. Furthermore, the influence of cancel culture could extend to medical research and scholarship. The fear of being canceled or facing backlash may deter researchers from investigating certain topics or questioning widely accepted narratives within the history of medicine. This self-censorship limits the generation of new knowledge, impedes critical analysis, and potentially hinders the development of a comprehensive understanding of medical history.

The interpretation of the Hippocratic Oath across the centuries, particularly concerning the controversial stance on abortion, revealed the challenges faced in understanding an ancient text within the context of present-day values and beliefs. As we navigate the intersection of tradition and contemporary perspectives in modern medicine, it is essential to recognize the symbolic value the Oath holds for new physicians while acknowledging its limitations in addressing

complex ethical dilemmas. The influence of cancel culture on the reading of the Hippocratic Oath during graduation ceremonies highlights the evolving dynamics in academia and the broader medical community. As medical professionals and scholars, we should embrace the complexities of history and ethics, recognizing that the Oath reflects the prevailing moral values of its time. Emphasizing open dialogue, critical analysis, and diverse perspectives will foster a comprehensive understanding of medical history while remaining responsive to societal concerns.

In essence, the Hippocratic Oath serves as a powerful reminder of medicine's enduring commitment to the well-being of patients and the moral responsibility of practitioners. By embracing its complexities and approaching it with an open mind, we can foster a more compassionate, patient-centered, and ethically conscious practice of medicine that aligns with the values of our time.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** All the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Statement of human and animal rights** This article does not contain any study with human and animals performed by any of the authors.

**Informed consent** Informed consent is not applicable.

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