

Chains of Gold

The Hippocratic Oath separates medicine from other professions. It recognizes that dealing with the very lives of people is a sacred responsibility that requires more than just technical skill and scientific understanding. It also requires unquestionable integrity of character as well as deep and true appreciation of life and of the worth of a person. The physician in history was not only a healer of the body but also a counselor, a friend, one capable of bringing solace to the soul. In the truest sense, the physician was an agent of the Lord in helping extend life and minimize pain and suffering. Devotion, true caring and mutual respect were the chains that tied patient and doctor into a unique and most special relationship.



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Moses Maimonides combined appropriately the qualities of a philosopher with those of a physician. This combination is the one that allowed him to capture so truly the spirit of Medicine in his writings, including his well-known Daily Prayer. Some of his words bear repetition even today:

"Almighty God, You have created the human body with infinite wisdom. In Your Eternal Providence You have chosen me to watch over the life and health of Your creatures."

Such lofty and yet most important thoughts are sometimes forgotten in the helter-skelter of the practice of medicine. A revolution of expectations is taking place at this time, as a result of which the population expects, as a matter of right, to obtain good medical care as one of many other things. Yet, society seems to have neither the means nor the personnel to deliver what is directly and indirectly promised. In spite of the significant increase in the number of physicians, they are often overworked, harrassed and not able to take the time necessary to practice medicine as it ought to be, and as it usually had been practiced.

Government and third-party payers have come into the picture and have demanded with increasingly loud voices the right to make decisions about the services for which they are paying. "He who pays the piper calls the tune," said they in effect. The independent judgment of physicians and the nature of their relationship with patients are being limited in a thousand and one ways by fiscal policies of insurance carriers and government. Reformers and bureaucrats have substituted their own judgment for that of physicians, and have presumed to be capable of deciding what is important and what is not in the practice of medicine. At best, they are well-meaning, but totally unqualified to make such judgments. At worst, they are jealous of the prerogatives of the honored profession of Medicine, the relatively high incomes of physicians and their prestige.

Physicians cannot alter such actions of others, except as individuals participating in the political process. But physicians must assume full responsibility for being seduced into participating *with* others in the corruption of their profession. By willingness to accept payments from third-parties, whether insurance companies or government, physicians have in effect given such others a great deal of power to determine how medicine is to be practiced. They have also in effect given up much of their right to decide the value of their time. Worst of all: They have allowed an outsider to come between them and their patient, thus destroying the intimacy, and threatening the mutual trust that were the cornerstones of this relationship.

Had physicians insisted on accepting payments *only* from patients, and categorically refused to accept any and all money sent to them directly from third parties, they would eventually have forced government and insurance carriers to compensate the patient rather than the doctor. But the lure of guaranteed, lump sum payments, was apparently too great a temptation.

Responsible and yet determined efforts on the part of the profession may yet reverse the trend at this, the eleventh hour. Any National Health Insurance program that is to be enacted should incorporate the principle of payment to subscribers rather than to physicians. All efforts are justified in an endeavor to restore conditions in which patients will again regard their physicians as a true friend and not as just an impersonal technician. Such efforts will not succeed unless physicians first correct the excesses that have been produced by streamlining practices, and again treat their patients as respected individuals, efficiently but not hurriedly. Our generation will be held responsible by history for having been negligent in guarding hallowed traditions that have developed over thousands of years if we fail in this task.

Physicians may not have realized in deciding to accept third party payments that in doing so they are also accepting chains on their freedom to practice their profession with dignity, and to live their lives with self respect. The chains are chains of gold, but they are chains nonetheless.

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