

Medical Education

The MAHSA University, Malaysia's medical student oath and a comparison of various oaths

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ABSTRACT

When students enrol in a medical school, they are not introduced to any ethical issues until later in the curriculum. The Hippocratic/physician's oath is taken upon graduation. A student oath is important to introduce students to the solemnity of the education they are dedicating themselves to. This oath is analysed and compared with the doctor's oath upon graduation and a few other oaths.

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INTRODUCTION

The medical student's oath is usually administered by various medical schools at the time of the student starting the professional course or at the time of entering their clinical years. It is to signify the entry of the student to a time-honoured profession and will usually inculcate historical and ethical aspects to guide the behaviour of the new entrant to the profession. It is sometimes held together with a white coat ceremony which is a physical manifestation of the wearing of an emblem of the profession by the student, helped by a professor, which also indicates the importance of role modelling to the student. The Faculty of Medicine at MAHSA University in Malaysia is a new entity that has so far produced 380 graduates in the workforce in the Malaysian public health sector since 2014. It is accredited by the Malaysian Medical Council and Malaysian Qualifications Agency, which are the local regulatory bodies and internationally by other bodies such as the Thai and Brunei Medical Councils. It is also listed in the International Medical Education Directory and Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research, which allows the graduates to sit for the United States Medical Licensing examination.

We wish to introduce the medical student's oath administered at MAHSA University, which inculcates elements of patient safety for the first time compared to other well-known oaths.

THE WHITE COAT CEREMONY AND THE MEDICAL STUDENT'S OATH

A 'white coat' ceremony functions as an initiation promise for students entering medical school. The white coat reminds doctors of their professional duties, as prescribed by Hippocrates, to lead

their lives and practice their art with integrity and honour. The white coat is a symbol of the medical profession.

Oaths are not a legal obligation and therefore cannot guarantee morality. Hence, why should doctors take an oath at all? In 1992, a British Medical Association working party found that affirmation may strengthen a doctor's resolve to behave with integrity in different clinical and interpersonal circumstances.¹

History

The white coat originated in scientific laboratories and was worn by laboratory technicians until the late 19th century when it was adopted as the standard apparel by physicians as they wished to apply scientific principles to the practice of medicine.²

The White Coat Ceremony (WCC) began in 1993 at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons and has since spread across the USA and the world. Since its inception in the USA, the WCC has become an important initiation phenomenon in many other countries.³ It is now practised at the beginning of their academic studies at many medical schools and is dedicated to endorsing and encouraging professional and moral development and humanism in medicine.

A study on WCCs in American medical schools was mapped to four domains: professionalism, morality, humanism and spirituality. The oath focused on humility and generosity. The study showed that WCCs did not celebrate the status of an elite class but marked the beginning of educational, personal and professional formation processes and urged students to develop into doctors 'worthy of trust'.⁴ Therefore, oath-taking can be described as a student's promise to himself/herself and society to be a professional and humanistic doctor, not a pledge to become a member of an exclusive club.

However, which oath should a medical student take at the beginning of their medical school years, before they are aware of what being a good doctor entails? Concerning the use of oaths, philosopher and bioethicist Robert Veatch asserts that the oath is thrust on students before they are able to decide whether they can agree with it or live up to it. Veatch suggests the use of a personalized student honour code rather than the Hippocratic oath. Because of the diversity of ethical traditions, 'an oath to practise medicine according to one particular, idiosyncratic moral code ... is not defensible'.⁵

When a student takes an oath during the WCC, he or she is promising to behave honourably as a medical student, not as a physician. Therefore, in the context of a WCC, the pledge is to learn within the parameters of these values as a student, not a practising physician (the values for which are exemplified in the Hippocratic oath). Obviously, the task of composing the declaration is a long and difficult one.

The Faculty of Medicine, MAHSA University's student oath

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was composed by the first author. MAHSA University evolved from the Malaysia Allied Health Sciences Academy which started as a nursing college.

Personal ethics

Cultural, religious and moral traditions are important, especially in an ethnically diverse society like Malaysia. However, there are certain values and responsibilities in medicine that, in principle, need to be followed since they represent medicine's science and art of practice.

For instance, a medical duty to conduct a comprehensive physical examination exists notwithstanding personal, religious and cultural beliefs surrounding modesty, bodily privacy and interaction with those of the opposite sex. The professional development that begins with the WCC should include reflection on these possible issues and any personal conflicts they may give rise to. A pledge to reflect on them honestly as a student is the beginning of that process. Medical morality is reinforced by medical training, both within and outside the classroom.

THE OATHS IN COMPARISON

Comparison with western medical oaths

The purpose of this article is not only to explain the student's oath of MAHSA University's Faculty of Medicine but also to compare the various oaths as they are in use today (Table I).^{6,7} The MAHSA medical student oath is listed in the first column of each table.

As stated by Veatch, a student entering medical school at the beginning of his/her career should not be taking the Hippocratic oath, which is a code of medical practice. The MAHSA oath is therefore a student oath committed to a promise of learning and also an acknowledgement of gratitude to those who have made sacrifices to enable the student to tread on this hallowed path.

Many points of the MAHSA student oath underline the moral principles of the Hippocratic oath and the Oath of the Geneva Convention (Table I).^{6,7} At the same time, the MAHSA oath affirms the Malaysian cultural values of being 'humble, polite, honest, punctual and hard-working', as well as the promise of lifelong learning which is an important part of being a doctor

TABLE I. Comparison of the MAHSA University student oath with western medical oaths

S.No.	MAHSA University student oath	Hippocratic oath of doctors ⁶	The physician's oath/Geneva convention ⁷
1	I will do my utmost to succeed in my chosen career while recognizing the sacrifices made by my parents and family to allow me to continue my education.		
2	I will respect and learn from my teachers and especially for my patients, I will realize that medicine cannot be learnt from textbooks alone. The patients I see will be my best teachers.	To hold him who taught me this art equally dear to me as my parents	I will give the respect and gratitude to my teachers, which is their due.
3	I will not become conceited that I know everything because medicine is a humbling science. What I know is like a grain of sand and what I do not know is so much more.		
4	I will always be humble, polite, honest, punctual and hard-working doing my full share of the duties that I need to perform as a student without being calculative so that I will gain useful knowledge that will stand me in good stead in future.		
5	I will learn the art and science of medicine for one does not exist without the other. I will need to learn this to be a compassionate and empathetic doctor.	In purity and according to divine law will I carry out my life and my art.	I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity.
6	I will always uphold patient confidentiality as I realize that patients trust us with their innermost secrets in the belief that we will help to cure them of their ills.	Whatever I see or hear in the lives of my patients, whether in connection with my professional practice or not, which ought not to be spoken of outside, I will keep secret, as considering all such things to be private.	
7	I will never use my patient to learn something without having already been trained and gained competency first. The patient must never suffer because I did not learn to say 'I do not know'.	I will not use the knife, even upon those suffering from stones, but I will leave this to those who are trained in this craft.	
8	I will work in a team with respect for all members no matter what their rank or status. I will take into consideration all opinions before making any decisions.		
9	I realize that resources are never unlimited and all patients may not get the ideal management. Whatever it is, I will always remain a patient advocate in their best interests.	I will do no harm or injustice to them.	The health of my patient will be my first consideration.
10	I will become a useful member of the community with respect to all irrespective of gender, colour, religion, wealth or beliefs and will always act in conformance to the rules, regulations and laws of the university and country.		I will not permit considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient.
11	Finally, I realize that prevention is always better than cure and that I have a prime role to play in this.		

TABLE II. Comparison of the MAHSA University student oath with other undergraduate oaths

S.No.	MAHSA University	UK medical schools ⁸	University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences ⁹	Changsha Medical University, China ¹⁰
1	I will do my utmost to succeed in my chosen career while recognizing the sacrifices made by my parents and family to allow me to continue my education.			I will always be in earnest pursuit of better achievement.
2	I will respect and learn from my teachers and especially for my patients, I will realize that medicine cannot be learnt from textbooks alone. The patients I see will be my best teachers.	I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk.	I will always seek to learn from the knowledge, wisdom and experience of my mentors.	I will scrupulously abide by the medical ethics, respect my teachers and discipline myself.
3	I will not become conceited that I know everything because medicine is a humbling science. What I know is like a grain of sand and what I do not know is so much more.	Above all, I must not play at God.	That my learning within the noble profession of medicine is a life-long process.	
4	I will always be humble, polite, honest, punctual and hard-working doing my full share of the duties that I need to perform as a student without being calculative so that I will gain useful knowledge that will stand me in good stead in future.		I will conduct myself with unquestionable integrity in all of my professional relations.	I will heal the wounded and rescue the dying, regardless of the hardships.
5	I will learn the art and science of medicine for one does not exist without the other. I will need to learn this to be a compassionate and empathetic doctor.	I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science and that warmth, sympathy and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.	I will honour the rich tradition embodied in learning the art and the science of medicine.	
6	I will always uphold patient confidentiality as I realize that patients trust us with their innermost secrets in the belief that we will help to cure them of their ills.	I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know.	I will henceforth preserve the confidentiality of my patients.	
7	I will never use my patient to learn something without having already been trained and gained competency first. The patient must never suffer because I did not learn to say 'I do not know'.	I will not be ashamed to say 'I do not know' nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.	I will render to them the highest possible standard of care.	
8	I will work in a team with respect for all members no matter what their rank or status. I will take into consideration all opinions before making any decisions.		Realizing the power of cooperation, and the common bond between the practitioners of the healing arts, I will respect the contributions of my brothers and sisters in medicine, pharmacy, nursing and in the health-related professions.	
9	I realize that resources are never unlimited and all patients may not get the ideal management. Whatever it is, I will always remain a patient advocate in their best interests.	I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability.		
10	I will become a useful member of the community with respect to all irrespective of gender, colour, religion, wealth or beliefs and will always act in conformance to the rules, regulations and laws of the university and country.	I will remember that I remain a member of society with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm.	May I always remember that henceforth I must put others before myself.	I am determined to strive diligently to eliminate man's suffering, enhance man's health conditions and uphold the chasteness and honour of medicine.
11	Finally, I realize that prevention is always better than cure and that I have a prime role to play in this.	I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.		

TABLE III. Comparison of the MAHSA University student oath with Eastern Medical oaths and Malaysian Medical Association Guidelines

S.No.	MAHSA University student oath	The Oath of a Muslim Physician ¹¹	The Chinese ten requirements ¹¹	Professional Ethics in Ancient Indian Medicine ¹¹
1	I will do my utmost to succeed in my chosen career while recognizing the sacrifices made by my parents and family to allow me to continue my education.			
2	I will respect and learn from my teachers and especially my patients for I will realize that medicine cannot be learnt from text-books alone. The patients I see will be my best teachers.	To maintain the dignity of healthcare and to honour the teachers		Thou shalt dedicate thyself to me and regard me as thy chief.
3	I will not become conceited that I know everything because medicine is a humbling science. What I know is like a grain of sand and what I do not know is so much more.	To strive in the pursuit of knowledge in thy name		There is no limit at all to the science of life, medicine. Hence, thou shouldst apply thyself to it with diligence. This is how thou should act.
4	I will always be humble, polite, honest, punctual and hard-working doing my full share of the duties that I need to perform as a student without being calculative so that I will gain useful knowledge that will stand me in good stead in future.	To be the instrument of thy will and mercy, and, in all humbleness, to exercise justice, love and compassion for all thy creation		Thou shalt behave and act without arrogance, with care and attention and with undistracted mind, humility, constant reflection.
5	I will learn the art and science of medicine for one does not exist without the other. I will need to learn this to be a compassionate and empathetic doctor.			
6	I will always uphold patient confidentiality as I realize that patients trust us with their innermost secrets in the belief that we will help to cure them of their ills.	To respect the confidence and guard the secrets of all patients	Female patients should be examined with a right attitude and should not be revealed to anybody, not even to the physician's own wife.	The peculiar customs of the patient's household shall not be made public. Even knowing that the patient's span of life has come to its close, it shall not be mentioned by thee there, where if so done, it would cause shock to the patient or to others.
7	I will never use my patient to learn something without having already been trained and gained competency first. The patient must never suffer because I did not learn to say 'I do not know'.			
8	I will work in a team with respect for all members no matter what their rank or status. I will take into consideration all opinions before making any decisions.			
9	I realize that resources are never unlimited and all patients may not get the ideal management. Whatever it is, I will always remain a patient advocate in their best interests.			
10	I will become a useful member of the community with respect to all irrespective of gender, colour, religion, wealth or beliefs and will always act in conformance to the rules, regulations and laws of the university and country.	To extend my hand of service to one and all, to the rich and to the poor, to friend and foe alike, regardless of race, religion or colour	Physicians should be ever ready to respond to any calls of patients, high or low, rich or poor. They should treat them equally and care not for financial reward.	
11	Finally, I realize that prevention is always better than cure and that I have a prime role to play in this.			

TABLE IV. Comparison of MAHSA University student oath with Malaysian Patient Safety Goals

S.No. MAHSA University student oath	S.No. Malaysian Patient Safety goals ¹²
1 I will do my utmost to succeed in my chosen career while recognizing the sacrifices made by my parents and family to allow me to continue my education.	
2 I will respect and learn from my teachers and especially for my patients, I will realize that medicine cannot be learnt from textbooks alone. The patients I see will be my best teachers.	
3 I will not become conceited that I know everything because medicine is a humbling science. What I know is like a grain of sand but what I do not know is so much more.	
4 I will always be humble, polite, honest, punctual and hard-working doing my full share of the duties that I need to perform as a student without being calculative so that I will gain useful knowledge that will stand me in good stead in future.	
5 I will learn the art and science of medicine for one does not exist without the other. I will need to learn this to be a compassionate and empathetic doctor.	
6 I will always uphold patient confidentiality as I realize that patients trust us with their innermost secrets in the belief that we will help to cure them of their ills.	
7 I will never use my patient to learn something without having already been trained and gained competency first. The patient must never suffer because I did not learn to say 'I do not know'.	
8 I will work in a team with respect for all members no matter what their rank or status. I will take into consideration all opinions before making any decisions.	8 To improve clinical communication by implementing critical value programme
9 I realize that resources are never unlimited and all patients may not get the ideal management. Whatever it is, I will always remain a patient advocate in their best interests.	9 To implement clinical governance
10 I will become a useful member of the community with respect to all irrespective of gender, colour, religion, wealth or beliefs and will always act in conformance to the rules, regulations and laws of the university and country.	
11 Finally, I realize that prevention is always better than cure and that I have a prime role to play in this.	10 To ensure medication safety 11 To reduce patient falls 12 To reduce the incidence of healthcare associated pressure ulcers

Numbers refer to points in the original Malaysian Patient Safety Goals

(‘What I know is like a grain of sand but what I do not know is so much more’). In today’s world, where lifestyle diseases have significantly overtaken infectious causes of morbidity and mortality, healthy lifestyles form an important method of patient management. This is affirmed in the promise that ‘prevention is better than cure’ (point 11).

Comparison with other undergraduate student oaths

MAHSA University, apart from accepting students from Malaysia, also has a large number of international students. The student’s oath too reaffirms this cultural diversity. A brief comparison has been made with WCC oaths of two western and one eastern university (Table II).⁸⁻¹⁰

The basic concepts of promises to learn the art and science of medicine remain universal (point 5).^{8,9} The concept that a doctor is not omniscient is a great improvement from the paternalistic attitude of yesteryears: ‘The patient must never suffer because I did not learn to say “I do not know” (point 7).^{8,9} The present perception of the general population as well as many who join medicine is that a doctor is only interested in monetary gain. A promise that ‘I will always remain a patient advocate in their best interests’ is an important promise for a student to be aware of (point 9). This is highlighted in the UK student oath as well.⁸

‘I will become a useful member of the community with respect

to all irrespective of gender, colour, religion, wealth or beliefs’ — point 10 is echoed in all the student oaths studied.⁸⁻¹⁰

Prevention is better than cure is an important concept to learn even as the student learns all about the treatment of diseases (point 11 and UK oath).⁸

Comparison with eastern medical oaths/Malaysian Medical Association guidelines

The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA), acknowledging Malaysia’s multi-ethnic and multicultural diversity, has referenced three separate oaths in its ethics code.¹¹

The three main oaths listed in the ethics code of the MMA are compared in Table III.¹¹ These comparisons not only highlight the commonalities between various oaths but also clearly show us that all doctors are healers first. Religion and other differences become secondary. Our university’s inclusive ideology enables each student taking the oath to identify completely with the promises they make, without the need for individual oath taking at this stage in their careers.

Points 2, 3 and 4 are about respect for teachers, the importance of learning and to always remain humble. Point 6 embodies patient confidentiality which remains an important ethical issue today in view of the internet. Point 10 compares a student’s and a doctor’s social responsibility.

Comparison with Malaysian patient safety goals

The MAHSA University student oath has an extra provision; in view of the importance of patient safety in medical care today (a point that was often ignored in the paternalistic culture of earlier medical education methods), the MAHSA oath incorporates the basic Malaysian Patient Safety Goals (Table IV).¹² These particular provisions (points 7, 8, 9 and 11) allow a new medical student to be aware of the concept of patient safety even as they begin their medical studies.

CONCLUSION

Oath-taking is a promise made to oneself and to society and is considered a rite of passage for a medical student. It is a realization of a doctor's social contract with society. For the student, it emphasizes his or her final aim of exemplary patient care.

'For the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient', said Francis W. Peabody, an American physician in the early 20th century. While technology advances at a breakneck pace, the simple art of patient care has begun to take a back seat. Bringing oath-taking into the forefront of a student's life as they enter medical school can help them focus on this important aspect of ethics right from the beginning of their career. Each part of this affirmation is explained to them by senior doctors who can personally identify with these precepts.

The solemnity and grandeur of a WCC make the occasion a memorable event in the lives of students. The idea is to bring to

the forefront of the student's mind the ideology of holistic patient care, which is often lost in day-to-day studies and knowledge acquisition during medical education.

Conflicts of interest. None declared

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