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978-1-108-06722-5 - Medical Ethics: Or, a Code of Institutes and Precepts, Adapted to the Professional Conduct of Physicians and Surgeons

Thomas Percival

Excerpt

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MEDICAL ETHICS;
OR
A CODE OF INSTITUTES AND PRECEPTS,
ADAPTED TO THE
PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT
OF
PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS.



CHAPTER I.

OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT, RELATIVE TO HOSPITALS,
OR OTHER MEDICAL CHARITIES.

I. **HOSPITAL** PHYSICIANS and SURGEONS should minister to the sick, with due impressions of the importance of their office; reflecting that the ease, the health, and the lives of those committed to their charge depend on their skill, attention, and fidelity. They should study, also, in their deportment, so to unite *tenderness* with *steadiness*, and *condescension* with *authority*, as to inspire the minds of their patients with gratitude, respect, and confidence.

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II. The

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[More information](#)

MEDICAL ETHICS.

11

constitutions. Even the *prejudices* of the sick are not to be contemned, or opposed with harshness. For though silenced by authority, they will operate secretly and forcibly on the mind, creating fear, anxiety, and watchfulness.

IV. As misapprehension may magnify real evils, or create imaginary ones, no *discussion* concerning the nature of the case should be entered into before the patients, either with the house surgeon, the pupils of the hospitals, or any medical visitor.

V. In the large wards of an Infirmary the patients should be interrogated concerning their complaints, in a *tone of voice* which cannot be *overheard*. *Secrecy*, also, when required by peculiar circumstances, should be strictly observed. And females should always be treated with the most scrupulous *delicacy*. To neglect or to sport with their feelings is cruelty; and every wound thus inflicted tends to produce a callousness of mind, a contempt of decorum, and an insensibility to modesty and virtue. Let these considerations be forcibly and repeatedly urged on the hospital pupils.

VI. The *moral* and *religious influence* of sickness is so favourable to the best interests

B 2

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of men and of society, that it is justly regarded as an important object in the establishment of every hospital. The *institutions* for promoting it should, therefore, be encouraged by the physicians and surgeons, whenever seasonable opportunities occur. And by pointing out these to the officiating clergyman, the sacred offices will be performed with propriety, discrimination, and greater certainty of success. The character of a physician is usually remote either from superstition or enthusiasm: And the aid, which he is now exhorted to give, will tend to their exclusion from the sick wards of the hospital, where their effects have often been known to be not only baneful, but even fatal.

VII. It is one of the circumstances which softens the lot of the poor, that they are exempt from the solitudes attendant on the disposal of property. Yet there are exceptions to this observation: And it may be necessary that an hospital patient, on the bed of sickness and death, should be reminded, by some friendly monitor, of the importance of a *last will and testament* to his wife, children, or relatives, who, otherwise, might be deprived of his effects, of his expected prize money, or of some future residuary legacy. This kind
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[More information](#)

MEDICAL ETHICS.

13

office will be best performed by the house-surgeon, whose frequent attendance on the sick diminishes their reserve, and entitles him to their familiar confidence. And he will doubtless regard the performance of it as a duty. For whatever is right to be done, and cannot by another be so well done, has the full force of moral and personal obligation.

VIII. The physicians and surgeons should not suffer themselves to be restrained, by parsimonious considerations, from prescribing *wine*, and *drugs* even of *high price*, when required in diseases of extraordinary malignity and danger. The efficacy of every medicine is proportionate to its purity and goodness; and on the degree of these properties, *cæteris paribus*, both the cure of the sick, and the speediness of its accomplishment must depend. But when drugs of inferior quality are employed, it is requisite to administer them in larger doses, and to continue the use of them a longer period of time; circumstances which, probably, more than counterbalance any savings in their original price. If the case, however, were far otherwise, no œconomy, of a fatal tendency, ought to be admitted into institutions, founded on principles of the purest beneficence, and which, in this age and country, when

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when well conducted, can never want contributions adequate to their liberal support.

IX. The medical gentlemen of every charitable institution are, in some degree, responsible for, and the guardians of, the honour of each other. No physician or surgeon, therefore, should *reveal* occurrences in the hospital, which may injure the reputation of any one of his colleagues; except under the restriction contained in the succeeding article.

X. No *professional charge* should be made by a physician or surgeon, either publicly or privately, against any associate, without previously laying the complaint before the gentlemen of the faculty belonging to the institution, that they may judge concerning the reasonableness of its grounds, and the measures to be adopted.

XI. A proper *discrimination* being established in all hospitals between the *medical* and *chirurgical cases*, it should be faithfully adhered to, by the physicians and surgeons, on the admission of patients.

XII. Whenever cases occur, attended with circumstances not heretofore observed, or in which the ordinary modes of practice have been attempted without success, it is for the public good, and in an especial degree advantageous

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[More information](#)

MEDICAL ETHICS.

15

vantageous to the poor (who, being the most numerous class of society, are the greatest beneficiaries of the healing art) that *new remedies* and *new methods of surgical treatment* should be devised. But in the accomplishment of this salutary purpose, the gentlemen of the faculty should be scrupulously and conscientiously governed by sound reason, just analogy, or well authenticated facts. And no such trials should be instituted, without a previous consultation of the physicians or surgeons, according to the nature of the case.

XIII. To advance professional improvement, a friendly and unreserved *intercourse* should subsist between the gentlemen of the faculty, with a free communication of whatever is extraordinary or interesting in the course of their hospital practice. And an *account* of every *case* or *operation*, which is rare, curious, or instructive, should be drawn up by the physician or surgeon, to whose charge it devolves, and entered in a register kept for the purpose, but open only to the physicians and surgeons of the charity.

XIV. *Hospital registers* usually contain only a simple report of the number of patients admitted and discharged. By adopting a more comprehensive plan, they might be rendered subservient

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subservient to medical science, and beneficial to mankind. The following sketch is offered, with deference, to the gentlemen of the faculty. Let the register consist of three tables ; the first specifying the number of patients admitted, cured, relieved, discharged, or dead ; the second the several diseases of the patients, with their events ; the third the sexes, ages, and occupations of the patients. The ages should be reduced into classes ; and the tables adapted to the four divisions of the year. By such an institution, the increase or decrease of sickness ; the attack, progress, and cessation of epidemics ; the comparative healthiness of different situations, climates, and seasons ; the influence of particular trades and manufactures on health and life ; with many other curious circumstances, not more interesting to physicians than to the community, would be ascertained with sufficient precision.

XV. By the adoption of the *register*, recommended in the foregoing article, physicians and surgeons would obtain a clearer insight into the comparative success of their hospital and private practice ; and would be incited to a diligent investigation of the causes of such difference. In particular diseases it will be found to subsist in a very remarkable degree :

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degree: And the discretionary power of the physician or surgeon, in the admission of patients, could not be exerted with more justice or humanity, than in refusing to consign to lingering suffering, and almost certain death, a numerous class of patients, inadvertently recommended as objects of these charitable institutions. “ In “ judging of diseases with regard to the propriety of their reception into hospitals,” says an excellent writer, “ the following general “ circumstances are to be considered :”

“ Whether they be capable of speedy relief; “ because, as it is the intention of charity to “ relieve as great a number as possible, a “ quick change of objects is to be wished; “ and also because the inbred disease of hospitals will almost inevitably creep, in some “ degree, upon one who continues a long “ time in them, but will rarely attack one, “ whose stay is short.

“ Whether they require in a particular manner the superintendence of skilful persons, “ either on account of their acute and dangerous nature, or any singularity or intricacy attending them, or erroneous opinions “ prevailing among the common people concerning their treatment.

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“ Whether

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“ Whether they be contagious, or subject
 “ in a peculiar degree to taint the air, and
 “ generate pestilential diseases.

“ Whether a fresh and pure air be pecu-
 “ liarly requisite for their cure, and they
 “ be remarkably injured by any vitiation of
 “ it.”*

XVI. But no precautions relative to the reception of patients, who labour under maladies incapable of relief, contagious in their nature, or liable to be aggravated by confinement in an impure atmosphere, can obviate the evils arising from *close wards*, and the false œconomy of crowding a number of persons into the least possible space. There are inbred diseases which it is the duty of the physician or surgeon to prevent, as far as lies in his power, by a strict and persevering attention to the whole medical polity of the hospital. This comprehends the discrimination of cases admissible, air, diet, cleanliness, and drugs; each of which articles should be subjected to a rigid scrutiny, at stated periods of time. (*c*)

XVII. The establishment of a *committee* of the *gentlemen* of the *faculty*, to be held
 monthly,

* See Dr. Aikin's *Thoughts on Hospitals*, p. 21.

(*c*) See *Notes and Illustrations*, No. III.