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Conclusion: Strange Remedies?

Hippocrates is, indeed, a pretty quotable guy. He has never been the sole preserve of either mainstream or alternative medical systems, and today he remains a trump card to be played in any medical competition. But, in the absence of any reliable knowledge of his own medical views, what that card shows always remains blurred, until someone puts it down. As Vivian Nutton wrote of the *Oath*, 'far from the *Oath* imposing its values on society, it has always been society that has imposed its interpretation and values on what that *Oath* is and means, and it has been constantly changed to accommodate the demands, the concerns, and, at times, the prejudices of society at large'.¹ The malleability of 'Hippocrates' reproduces that of the *Oath*. Ann La Berge drew attention to Louis Peisse, a journalist and a member of the Academy of Medicine, who in 1857 stated that 'each has the right to hippocratise to his delight' and to make Hippocrates – 'the old sage' – into a follower of any of the then-current medical sects; she commented, 'Hippocrates could stand for virtually any position within Paris medicine, and was used in inconsistent and contradictory ways'.²

In 1860, the caricaturist Cham (Amédée Charles de Noé) wrote *Cours d'Hygiène*. It is a short illustrated parody of advice literature, noting for example how the movement of bile around your body is improved when you find your servant sitting reading the newspaper for which he has kept you waiting for over two hours.³ Here is the title page (Figure 4):

Fig. 4 A fool is writing an insult on the pedestal of a statue of Hippocrates. Lithograph by Cham, c. 1850. Wellcome Collection. CC BY.

The fool, in his cap and bells, writes ‘Hippocrate perruque!’ Hippocrates, meanwhile, looks furious. What does the inscription mean? ‘Perruque,’ ‘wig,’ is used for someone who is too old for his job, or who follows old-fashioned ideas.⁴ This would suggest that Hippocrates’ ideas on diet are now out of date, and this is consistent with the book’s images of the realities of the strains of modern life. However, the one who is writing is a fool: perhaps, therefore, the message is that Hippocrates is not really out of date at all.

In some ways, nothing has changed. Hippocrates can still be used in many different ways. The Hippocrates of the internet age is still blurred, until brought into focus through the lens of whoever is using him for whatever purpose. I am struck by how Hippocrates is often described in religious terms; it is a heresy to say he did not exist, quotes may be produced like Bible verses, his gospel is promoted, and he is claimed as a patron saint. The *Oath* can mark the entry

into the priesthood of the orthodox medical profession, or be waved around like a censer. Is he saviour, or scientist? Humane, or detached? Characterized by his empathy, or by his powers of observation and note-taking? He can be any one of these. Recent works proclaim that he is not dead, that he is crying, or that he is turning over in his grave. One point of consistency is that Hippocrates is 'right', or 'ahead of his time'. Just occasionally he lets us down – in particular, he was unable to cure his own baldness – but these exceptions are striking because they are so unusual.

But in other ways, things are different. While once alternative forms of medicine tried to claim him as their founder in order to take on his antiquity and his moral respectability, today he is more likely to be a medical renegade, misunderstood by the Establishment, dedicated to overthrowing the very medical system which used to honour him as Father. While stories have been made up about him for a very long time, four factors strike me as new, or at least exaggerated, today. The first is that we encounter Hippocrates in quotes. Ever since Galen, we have identified as Hippocratic the treatises we like the most, those which most resonate with us in terms of their theory or their practice, but in his popular reception these are now forgotten, and instead isolated quotes – some of them nothing to do with any Hippocratic text – are interpreted, displayed and combined at will. The separation of this Hippocrates in quotes from the traditional debates about which of the treatises he really wrote is part of the fragmentation of knowledge; medicine, in all its forms, has moved away from the discussions that are still going on in the humanities. Quotes can be decorative, or claim knowledge, but they are shared without explanation or commentary, and they may lose all sense that there ever was a larger text. Robert Goldberg, writing about modern fears about medicine, wrote that misleading claims 'becom[e] apparent truth through sheer repetition'.⁵ This could also be said of quotes. Phrases such as 'let food be thy medicine' become more loaded with significance with each re-tweet or re-post. The sheer number of these draws authority into the phrase, and cements the idea that Hippocrates 'said' it. Does the quote mean that one food cures one condition, that we should follow a complete dietary and lifestyle plan, or that we should all eat superfoods alleged to prevent many diseases? Does it support a raw food diet or a high fibre diet? That depends on the user of the quote but, by using it, one shares in the authority of Hippocrates.

Secondly, we are more aware than before that we lack anything against which to measure the stories that are told; Hippocrates has always been a construct, but we are now even less confident that we can judge between a use and an abuse of his name. It is not just that it is difficult to find reliable information about him; there is simply no such information. In the modern market of knowledge, Wikipedia holds the key place, and those looking for material will find it or one of its derivatives; however, for many people the first places they will learn about Hippocrates are news stories, answers sites or social media. In news stories, he is usually proved 'right', and he is used to support the idea of continuity; for example, the myth that he 'named hysteria' promotes disease categories fixed across time. The effect of this claimed continuity is to make the words of Hippocrates retain their value now: if diseases are the same, why would a cure not continue to work? In many ways, this makes no sense; Christopher Wanjek asks 'why do we yearn for other ancient cures and customs born of the same logic, from an era when most people died young from diseases we've since licked?'⁶ Robert Goldberg speculates about those who refuse to allow their children to receive MMR vaccinations, noting that 'few parents had ever seen the diseases that immunization had rendered rare or extinct, and, as a result, failed to comprehend their danger.'⁷ Yet the appeal of the past is a real one, particularly when modern society and its medicine seem so complex and confusing.

The third factor is one which tries to compensate for the absence of any fixed point; in its place, we have the personal connection with Hippocrates which people can feel. 'Hippocratic texts' have always tended to morph into 'Hippocrates' the man – sometimes it is just easier to write 'Hippocrates said' rather than 'in this Hippocratic text we read' – but this process is particularly exaggerated today. While he is eminently quotable, with his quotes acquiring the status of proverbs, it is very important to users that he is also real. 'To antiquity it mattered less whether the ideal was historical than whether it was personified. The ideal physician needed a name, and Hippocrates supplied it.'⁸ Pinault's conclusions are still valid, but Hippocrates also seems to have moved beyond the texts which may or may not have been his work, to become a fellow-traveller on whatever path the writer is taking. Today, we find people wanting to believe in him and longing to read his own words. You can chat with him as Dr Hip or as Crates and see what he thinks. You can sit under

‘his’ tree or one of its descendants. You can look at his face and yearn for his excellent bedside manner. You can use his juice, drink his soup, follow his protocol or attend the Institute named for him; all of these are ways people meet Hippocrates today.

Fourthly, I think something new is the level of creativity which has come into play because of the lack of fixed points; and, while this can be playful, it is often very serious. As any interest in deciding which of the existing treatises he wrote has declined, imaginary treatises have entered the picture: *The Complicated Body*, *Natural Exercise*, the book he would have written from his notes on diseases of the mind, his herb codex. People have always made up their own Hippocrates – from the time of Plato onwards – but the prison story and the enthusiasm with which it is embraced shows a far higher level of imagination. Yet even the prison story is not entirely divorced from the older traditions; it plays into the tradition of his high ethical standards, as he has done nothing wrong, and he goes on treating prisoners in jail. But this story also makes him into a figure driven by a Protestant work ethic, continuing to write the greatest of all his books and making the best of his situation.

The Hippocrates we meet today, with his respect for Nature, is the result of unease about the invasive nature of modern medicine which, by definition, ‘does harm’; he reflects the fact that, in the USA in particular, ‘mistrust haunts the public’s and medical professionals’ view of the health-care system.’⁹ He has been enlisted by those who believe, in the words of Alan Levinovitz, that ‘Modernity is dangerous and unnatural, and the solution to numerous fearsome ailments lies in returning to the lifestyle of paradise past’, the myth ‘behind every single blockbuster diet of the last decade.’¹⁰ Hippocrates is the enemy of Big Pharma and its commodification of drugs, and the supporter of the pure and the natural; yet, of course, the holistic devotees of Hippocrates themselves have something to sell. There is, not surprisingly, a Hippocratic quote for this too: ‘Now laymen do not accurately distinguish those who are excellent in this respect (treating acute diseases) from their fellows, but rather praise or blame strange remedies’, from *Regimen in Acute Diseases* 6.¹¹ The passage continues ‘it is in the proper treatment of these illnesses that ordinary folk show their most stupid side, in the fact that through these diseases chiefly quacks get the reputation of being physicians’.

Hippocrates is not dead; in many ways, he is more alive than ever before.