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## TO WRITE A THERIATRIC OATH\*

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The Veterinarian's Oath was a disappointment to me. When I first read it as a freshman, I suppose I was expecting something along the lines of the Hippocratic Oath; instead I was struck by the contrast to it—by the lack of eloquence, of poetry, of ancient power. As impressionable as I was then, a whole year and a half ago, it left me unmoved. Now, having had my eyes opened to its more troubling ethical difficulties, I feel the desire to create something better, something that is at least more meaningful to me. As an individual, particularly without extensive dialogue with my peers, I can't even pretend to create an oath suitable for all veterinary graduates for all time to come. This is, at best, my endeavor to write an oath which in the very writing can help clarify and define for me my moral stand, which will challenge me to be true to that stand, and to which I can honestly and earnestly hold myself responsible.

So here are two oaths sworn by those who make medicine their livelihood. I find the Veterinarian's Oath deficient and unsatisfactory on all counts. The Hippocratic, while admirable, is obviously not suited for a veterinarian's needs. Therefore I submit for my reader and myself a new oath.

The title is mostly a whim. What little significance it has is in its root, *ther*, meaning "wild beast." This is in contrast to the root of "veterinarian" which pertains to beasts of burden. It is to remind me that the animals I will deal with were all ancestrally wild, independent of humanity for their life and livelihood. In defense of the fact that this

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oath is even longer than the Hippocratic, let me say two things. First of all, life hasn't gotten any simpler since the latter was written. And second, I bow to Hippocrates' superior writing skill.

I begin with "I swear" as a statement of active commitment. I invoke the beings I do with reason. Apollon the healer is also Apollon the destroyer. As one who will have to destroy life as well as seek to aid it, I appeal to the god who was known to bring swift, painless death. Asklepios, son of Apollon and god of healing, is clearly a significant being to call upon and his close association with snakes ties him yet closer to veterinary medicine. Hygieia, the lady of health, should be strongly invoked by all in medicine as our emphasis should ever be more on nurturing health. Of all these gods, Cheiron is most powerfully and singularly important to veterinary medicine. The wise centaur was greatly skilled in medicine and was said to be the teacher of Asklepios himself. As both beast and man, he shows as none other the continuity of the natural and human world; he weaves the wisdom of both into a harmonious whole as no other centaur and very few humans have been able. There is importance in the fact that Cheiron, immortal and suffering from an incurable poison, chose as his final blessing the relinquishment of his immortality. Therein lies a message all healers should be mindful of. As to "the one God" to whom this oath is made—this is not the occasion to explain my religious beliefs. I will only emphasize that an oath must be made to a significant entity, preferably the most significant of all entities, whatever the swearer conceives that to be.

I have purposefully made a broad statement of goal: "to use all my skills," etc. I made an effort to include all abilities, not merely scientific, in the pursuit of the goals as I feel this is vital to halt the dehumanization of doctor, patient, and client in both human and veterinary medicine. It could be argued that considering acid rain, nuclear fallout, etc., the phrase "animals... touched by human activity" includes *all* animals on the face of the globe. Overwhelming as it is, I support that interpretation because as human beings we all have such responsibilities. As a veterinarian, I would narrow the interpretation to those animals within my sphere of influence, a condition sufficiently overwhelming.

I have quoted directly from the Veterinarian's Oath in "protection of animal health" because it was the most direct and appropriate wording. I fully realize that animal well-being, human health, and medical wisdom may come into conflict, and I've tried to deal with this below. Here I have made two stipulations: I support the growth of medical wisdom *when* it is to the benefit of human or animal health—and that it is *wisdom* I support. Knowing how long an animal will survive being blinded with hot needles may in some obscene sense increase medical knowledge but this has *nothing* to do with wisdom. I realize that I've said nothing directly about pure, unapplied research which is a troubling

proposition. I fully believe that the need to discover is a deep part of human nature and, therefore, a right—but not an absolute one. This, like a number of other things, has to be toiled through case by case, weighing benefit against harm.

The portion concerning referral of patients is the only very specific point I make. Perhaps it is not vital to the oath. I leave it in partly in emulation of Hippocrates and partly because of two important statements contained therein—doing one's best on a daily basis and refusing to harm an animal for vanity's sake. The latter can and should be interpreted as a refusal to do harm for the client's vanity as well (e.g. ear-cropping).

In the last sentence of the first paragraph and all of the succeeding paragraphs, I try to address the conflicts of benefit and harm, human and animal welfare, and my responsibility to humans and animals. If I'm accused of being ambiguous, of resolving nothing, I have to plead guilty. These are some of the most difficult issues I know of. I have tried to acknowledge my inescapable responsibility to both humans and animals. There will be times when I have to wrong one to do good for the other, and I can't possibly resolve all those conflicts in advance. I can only hope my courage doesn't fail during those times. My last statement of the paragraph is not an abdication of responsibility; it is an assertion of my belief that all beings, humans included, have a right to ultimate loyalty to their own species.

Beyond these responsibilities as a veterinarian and a human being, I will have certain professional obligations to people, socially and individually. In the third paragraph I have tried to define and clarify these as well as emphasize my human, individual, and professional commitment to animal welfare. Passing this belief on in word and deed is the teaching to which veterinarians are obligated.

Life, as has been said, is not simple. I am convinced that there will always be situations where we all must act in ignorance of whether our acts are wrong or right. I also believe we have to accept the guilt in those situations, regardless. However, I hold with Aristotle that we are *not* guilty of those things we do unknowing and unwilling, and that no one need accept unnecessary guilt. I do not have Hippocrates' courage to call down a curse on myself for having failed, feeling that is all too likely to happen. I do hope and believe that trying counts.

Looking over this oath, I'm left with a number of impressions. It's idealistic; it's rough; I've probably set some impossible goals for myself. But I am willing to swear to it, as long as it can grow with me. If as I mature I see things unworthy of swearing to, then let them be changed. Otherwise, may I indeed be granted the courage, fortitude, and wisdom to carry out this oath. I'll need plenty.

## A Theriatic Oath

I swear by Appollon the Healer, by Asklepios, by Cheiron, by Hygieia and to the one God whose children we all are, that to the best of my human power I shall keep this oath: to use all my skills, faculties, and sensitivities for the benefit of animals whose lives and deaths are touched by human activity. To this end, I shall work for the protection of animal health and the relief of animal suffering; for this purpose, and for the benefit of human health, I shall support the growth of medical wisdom. In my daily work, I shall use my abilities to their best extent, but where they are inadequate and I know of others who excel, I shall refer my patients to their skill; I shall not endanger an animal's health for vanity's sake. Knowing that benefit and injury are deeply interwoven in all things, especially medicine, I shall strive always to do more good than harm.

In all my actions I must recognize the possible benefit and harm to human well-being, especially to those people whose welfare depends upon animals. Knowing that animal and human good are closely tied, I will strive for the advancement of both whenever possible. When these interests conflict, I shall not lightly transgress the rights to life and nature of one for the benefit of the other. But I must realize that I am by choice and calling a veterinarian, by fate a human being; my final lot is cast with humanity.

My society has placed me in a position of respect and authority. I shall try to accept this position honorably and without arrogance. Knowing that people shall turn to me for knowledge and even wisdom, I will do my best to pass on such as I have, and especially by word and action to assert the inherent rights of animals to life according to their natures. Knowing that people may entrust to me their confidences as they would not to others because of my station, I will not lightly betray that trust. But neither will I allow insufferable wrongs to continue because of my silence. Knowing better than most that my colleagues are striving yet fallible human beings, I give them my respect and will be slow to judge their failings. But I shall not conceal wrong-doing under the aegis of Asklepios.

Knowing that I shall be called upon to weigh the many against the one, suffering against well-being, life against death; knowing that much of my life, even in these most important matters, I shall act in irremediable ignorance, I accept any guilt for whatever I do consciously and willingly. I ask the forbearance of others when I act in good faith to the best of my powers. I gladly embrace the commitment to grow in knowledge, skill, and wisdom the rest of my days.

As long as I strive to keep this oath, may I be granted courage, fortitude, and wisdom to do so. Where in good faith I fail, may I be corrected. Where I succeed, may I be granted to enjoy the fulfillment of life and my profession.

## The Veterinarian's Oath

“Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, the conservation of livestock resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.

“I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.

“I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.”

*JAVMA*. Vol. 17: 1970, p. 878.

## The Hippocratic Oath

“I swear by Apollo the physician, by Aesculapius, by Hygeia, Panacea, and all the gods and goddesses, that according to my best ability and judgement, I will keep this oath and stipulation; to reckon him who taught me this art equally dear to me as my parents; to share my substance with him and relieve his necessities if required; to regard his offspring as on the same footing as my own brothers, and to teach them this art if they shall wish to learn it, without fee or stipulation, and that by precept, oral teaching and every other mode of instruction, I will impart a knowledge of the art to my own sons and to those of my teachers, and to disciples bound by a stipulation and oath, according to the law of medicine, but to no others.

“I will follow that method of treatment, which, according to my ability and judgement, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous. I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel; furthermore, I will not give to a woman an instrument to produce abortion.

“With purity and holiness I will pass my life and practice my art. I will not cut a person who is suffering with a stone, but will leave this to be done by practitioners of this work. Into whatever houses I enter I will go into them for the benefit of the sick and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption, and, further, from the seduction of females or males, bound or free.

“Whatever in connection with my professional practice, or not in connection with it, I may see or hear in the lives of men which ought not be spoken abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret.

“While I continue to keep this oath inviolate, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of my art, respected always by all men, but should I trespass this oath, may the reverse be my lot.”