

Teaching Tips

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Teaching the Tenets of the Hippocratic Oath

The Hippocratic Oath is twenty-five centuries old. Despite its age, it provides insight into questions of medical ethics even today. The collective wisdom of Hippocrates is called the Corpus Hippocraticum: while much of what is attributed to Hippocrates may not truly have been said by him, we still reference it as a teaching of Hippocrates. Below are tips to weave the wisdom of Hippocrates into your teaching sessions with medical students.

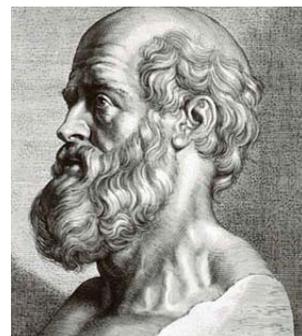


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1. First do no harm

Aristotle said, "It is sometimes wiser to know when not to measure things." Advise your students to think about each action they take. For example, a test for a patient should only be ordered when there is a plan to take action regarding the results.

2. Observe all

Teach your students to be cognizant of everything they find in the medical exam room. For example, be aware of how you feel when you enter a patient's room. If you notice that you feel depressed when you see a patient, look closely and evaluate if your patient is depressed. Observe how your patient makes you feel.

3. Document your findings accurately

Hippocrates emphasized clear and precise observation and documentation. Point out to your students the importance of careful and clear documentation. When students write "lungs are clear to P & A," did they actually percuss the lungs? If they write no C/C/E (clubbing, cyanosis, and edema), but didn't actually check for clubbing or cyanosis, encourage them to write "no edema" in order to document accurately.

4. Assist nature

Hippocrates said we should "assist nature" when treating patients. If a patient wishes to "let nature take its course," respect their wishes. Remember the importance of the patient's perspective in their care.

5. Prognosticate when you can

Another theme that can be attributed to Hippocrates is "prognosticate when you can." For example, if a patient is near death, we should be clear about what we know and do not know and share it with the family so they can prepare.

Reference: Colgan R. (2010). Inviting Hippocrates Along on a Home Visit. *The Teaching Physician*; 9 (3): 1 & 4.