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PROFESSION

Medical oaths less of a moral compass for physicians

Only 26% say the Hippocratic Oath strongly influences their practice of medicine.

By KEVIN B. O'REILLY, amednews staff. *Posted April 1, 2011.*

Most physicians take part in a medical school oath ceremony, but few believe that the rite of passage has strongly shaped their sense of professionalism, according to an article published March 14 in *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

Nearly 80% of 1,032 practicing physicians surveyed in 2009 said they took part in a medical school oath ceremony using the original or modified version of the Hippocratic Oath, the Osteopathic Oath, the Prayer of Maimonides or the Declaration of Geneva. However, only 26% said the oath they took significantly influenced their practice of medicine or provided moral guidance in their medical careers (**archinte.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/extract/171/5/469**).

"These data suggest that for most physicians, the taking of the oath is not a pivotal, meaningful, signal event, but just something that happens," said Farr A. Curlin, MD, co-author of the article. "Some people take it really seriously, and are looking to take it seriously. Others just see it as one more ritual that doesn't have much more significance than other things they do."

Physicians who said religion is important were more likely to say that their medical school oath was influential than were less-religious doctors.

When asked to list influential sources of medical ethical guidance, more than 90% of the surveyed physicians said their "personal sense of wrong and right" helps guide their practice. More than a third of doctors cited "great moral teachers," 28% cited their religious faith and 16% noted the American Medical Association Code of Medical Ethics. The AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs is reorganizing the code to consolidate redundant opinions, identify gaps in policy and make it easier to use.

Medical schools should encourage students to explore how their religious faith could guide their practice, said Dr. Curlin, co-director of the University of Chicago's Program on Medicine and Religion.

"Within these broad moral traditions that exist in our culture, there are ways for people in those communities to challenge each other to practice medicine to a higher standard than just how much money you can make and how much you can get out of it for yourself," Dr. Curlin said. "Medicine doesn't have a shared moral resource to remind people of that. It kind of casts about and mixes in all sorts of stuff. Students obviously are turning a great deal of stuff over in their own minds."

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