



A Short History of Medical Ethics

Albert R Jonsen

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A physician says, "I have an ethical obligation never to cause the death of a patient," another responds, "My ethical obligation is to relieve pain even if the patient dies." The current argument over the role of physicians in assisting patients to die constantly refers to the ethical duties of the profession. References to the Hippocratic Oath are often heard. Many modern problems, from assisted suicide to accessible health care, raise questions about the traditional ethics of medicine and the medical profession. However, few know what the traditional ethics are and how they came into being. This book provides a brief tour of the complex story of medical ethics evolved over centuries in both Western and Eastern cultures. It sets this story in the social and cultural contexts in which the work of healing was practiced and suggests that, behind the many different perceptions about the ethical duties of physicians, certain themes appear constantly, and may be relevant to modern debates. The book begins with the Hippocratic Medicine of ancient Greece, moves through the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe, and the long history of Indian and Chinese medicine, ending as the problems raised modern medical science and technology challenge the settled ethics of the long tradition.

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