so-called Hippocratic Oath. I think the reason why it is not, as a rule, discussed must be the fact that it is in principle taken for granted, even when its deficiencies for contemporary medicine are realized. The oath named after Hippocrates is generally considered as a universally valid text in medical ethics. Seemingly, it is taken to be "universal" in space and time. In time because it has been a historically well-known text (in the Western world), different versions having changes or adaptations in accordance with the dominant secular or religious ideology in a given society. In space because different versions of the original text are apparently an indispensable part of the graduation ceremonies of medical schools in many parts of the world.

Few people, it seems, ask whether this ancient text (which is, by the way, not the oldest one in medical history) could justifiably be valid in the face of contemporary ethical issues in medicine (1) (or in any other health profession). Given the radical scientific, technical, sociopolitical, legal and other developments in the world which have evidently affected all human societies, what medicoethical relevance could any passage in the related texts possibly have:

- in the case of clinical research, where the informed, free, express and specific consent of the experimental subject is now considered indispensable?
- when one considers the complex technicality involved in modern surgery?
- in the increasing role and participation of the individual in social affairs, and of the patient in therapeutic medicine?
- in the case of compulsory preventive measures such as genetic screening, vaccination, or the fluoridation of water supplies?
- whenever the rights of the individuals of other species are taken into account in animal experiments?

The hippocratic oath: an anachronism?

Sir – Having read with great interest the Round Table entitled “Would Machiavelli now be a better guide for doctors than Hippocrates?” (World Health Forum, 1993, 14: 105–132), I should like to comment on the
Even in the case of the patient-physician relationship, which is the only aspect of interhuman relationships in medicine considered in the traditional oath and its derivatives, the content and the linguistic formulations of the related passages are definitely outmoded and even anachronistic - let alone the quite irrelevant passages on one's teacher and his sons, on one's own sons, and so on.

"First protect human beings and society from disease, accidents, deformity, disability and similar serious unwanted conditions, psychologically, socially, economically, as well as biologically" should be the principal maxim in modern medicine. Those of us in the profession and in society at large who see therapeutic activity as the most important aspect of medicine could make an analogy between the potential patients and their cars – what would they prefer: a well-protected, well-cared-for vehicle, or one which does not function properly and may break down?

Where the socioeconomic philosophy is "consume, consume, and consume", as in the case of the so-called New World Order, and when health becomes a personal state to be purchased, medical activity will "justifiably" be equated with clinical practice. And in this respect the Oath would be quite acceptable to those who act as the protectors or stabilizers of the established order. One wonders what Hippocrates, as one of the greatest revolutionaries in medical history, would, and could, say about the near-persistence of a moral text in medicine centuries later?

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