Sarah Sha

Primum Non Nocere: Do No Harm

“I will use my power to help the sick to the best of my ability and judgment; I will abstain from harming or wrongdoing any man by it.” – Hippocrates, The Hippocratic Oath, Hippocratic Writings (67)

While scrolling through social media during the COVID-19 pandemic I see endless posts thanking front liners and hailing them as heroes. While this gratitude is warranted, it distracts from the fact that doctors and nurses are not being given the proper PPE during this crisis. At hospitals across the country, healthcare workers are being forced to ration and reuse masks and other PPE because of shortages, putting them at risk for coronavirus themselves. During a PPE protest at Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx, one nurse commented: “Prior to coronavirus, they were one-time use, you use them for a patient, and they went in the garbage. Now all of a sudden, the CDC is saying that it’s fine for us to reuse them and these choices are being made not based on science, they’re being made based on need.” Another nurse at the protest said: “We got emails saying that we are expected to work every single day even if I test positive unless I have a fever.” In addition, an anonymous internal medicine resident in New York City said “health care workers can’t just go on television to convey the honest truth because all hospitals have a strict no media policy, our voices have no outlet while the virus rapidly spreads.” Christina Norstein, an intensive-care nurse at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx says: “I feel like we’re being sent to slaughter.” Physicians and nurses are not sacrificial lambs; they are human, not expendable. This blatant disregard for their employees’ health and thus their patients clearly displays the failings of hospital administrations across the country to stockpile adequate PPE in favor of saving money. As physician-poet Rafael Campo states in his book The Desire to Heal:

“In the same way that making money already places traditional insurers and pharmaceuticals companies at odds with all patients… managed-care bureaucrats who are not ultimately responsible for what happens to patients are in charge of making life-or-death decisions. Even more than the further dehumanization of medical caregiving, …it is ultimately the blatant corporatizing of health care delivery that is the most destructive element of the proposed changes to medicine. Profiting from the suffering of others is repulsive indeed.” (Campo 220)

The current pandemic has brought to light the failures of the American healthcare system, run by “managed-care bureaucrats” who do not care about patient lives but instead actually “[profit] from their suffering” (Campo 220). Campo’s description of healthcare as corporatized is justified as it is this “corporatizing” that has forced doctors and nurses across the country to make “life-or-death decisions” working without PPE because of hospital administrators’ greed. (220)

As a resident at Jacobi Medical Center commented: “It’s as if the hospital has forgotten the Do No Harm part of the Hippocratic Oath.” The “Do No Harm” clause of the Hippocratic Oath, the pledge taken by all physicians states: “I will use my power to help the sick to the best of my ability and judgment; I will abstain from harming or wrongdoing any man by it” (Hippocrates 67). Dr. Trisha Pasricha, a research fellow in gastroenterology at Massachusetts General Hospital states: “When we take the Hippocratic Oath to become doctors, we pledge to
care for patients and respect their confidentiality. Never once do we vow to risk our own lives.” Indeed, one may wonder why physicians and nurses would continue to risk their lives and go to work each day. Campo clearly explains why so many doctors and nurses are not backing down but instead rising to the challenge even as their administration has failed them:

“I thought medicine was about doing the most good for the most people, through the perfect union of mind and action. Medicine was, in my exuberant and youthful imagination, more than merely an occupation...demanding absolute dedication to a community.” (Campo 199)

As Campo states, to all healthcare workers, medicine is “more than merely an occupation,” it is a commitment to doing the best you can for a patient, not merely a job. (199) As a nurse from Jacobi Medical Center said “We do not need a pat on the back to tell us how good we are doing, we need PPE. We are committed because that’s what we went to school for. To save lives.” The last clause of the Hippocratic Oath states: “If, therefore, I observe this Oath and do not violate it, may I prosper both in my life and in my profession, earning good repute among all men for all time. If I transgress and forswear this Oath, may my lot be otherwise” (Hippocrates 67). It is clear who will remain in “good repute among all men for all time” and who has transgressed the Oath during this pandemic.
Works Cited


