

STS.005: Disease and Society in America  
Third Paper Assignment

Codes of Ethics

Due at start of Lecture: 22 November 2005

The medical profession faced a crisis in the mid-19th century. Doctors doubted the value of their treatments. Patients feared hospitals. Competition between medical schools eroded educational standards. Few states bothered to regulate medical practice. Unorthodox practitioners tempted patients with promises of safer remedies. Many doctors looked for ways to reform their profession.

In 1846 a small group of doctors created the American Medical Association. The AMA quickly did two things: it appointed a committee on education reform and it adopted a Code of Medical Ethics. This was not the first time a group of doctors had created such a code. The most famous example, the Hippocratic Oath, was written by an unknown doctor around 400 B.C. Nor was it the last: the AMA regularly revises the code to keep it relevant. For one example see the 1957 Principles of Medical Ethics.

A Code of Ethics is many things. It defines an ideal: what is an ideal doctor, and how does a doctor behave? It reflects concern about image: how did doctors want to be perceived by patients, practitioners, and governments? It exposes transgressions: misbehaviors that are mentioned must not have been uncommon. Codes also leave much unsaid: what is missing can be as revealing as what is said. A code can reveal both the hopes and anxieties of a profession.

Write a 2000-word (6-8 page) essay that uses these three codes to explore and explain the medical profession.

Start with the 1847 Code of Ethics:

First, what did its authors identify as the most important problems facing the profession? What conflicts did doctors perceive? Devise a way to classify their concerns (e.g. disease theories, therapeutic practices, financial arrangements, patient-doctor relationships, or whatever else you find in it). Which concerns get the most attention?

Second, why did these concerns emerge? Why did doctors worry about these issues in 1847? What does this reveal about the profession and its leaders?

Third, examine the specific advice in the Code. What behaviors did the authors recommend? How would these practices address the various concerns and anxieties and make medicine more credible and more appealing?

Then answer one of the following sets of questions:

Option One: compare the 1847 Code to the Hippocratic Oath and the 1957 Principles. What anxieties persist? What does this reveal about medicine? Are there important concerns that appear in one code but not in the others? If so, why? Medical ethicists now struggle with abortion, euthanasia, rationing, etc. Do any of these appear in the Codes? Why and why not? Feel free to speculate.

Option Two: pick two of the practitioners whom we have discussed and examine how well their behavior conforms to the ideals contained in the codes. Does Martha Ballard embody the Hippocratic ideals? What would the authors of the 1847 Code say about the interactions between Mather, Boylston, and Douglas? Between Ballard and Cony? Between Rush and his patients and his peers? Feel free to transgress temporal boundaries.

Option Three: the readings and lectures have discussed many issues that historians have identified as ethical problems (medical racism; exclusion of women; Tuskegee; asylums and institutionalization; inoculation, etc.). Compare two specific cases to what you find in the ethics codes. Are these issues within the scope of the codes? Do the codes address the range of problematic behavior in medicine? Are there significant blind spots in the codes? Why or why not? What do you think the codes' authors would say if asked about these issues?

As you formulate your answers, consider these guidelines and disclaimers:

- Some of you have found past assignments too constrictive. If, after reading the three codes, you have a different idea for an interesting paper about the codes and the profession, go for it. Just bounce the idea off your TA in advance.
- The 1847 Code is long. You do not need to discuss every specific issue. Identify a few major underlying concerns, justify your choice, and focus on them.
- The AMA in 1847 did not represent the profession. Most doctors did not belong. So be careful in your writing: do not simply generalize from "the authors of the code..." to "all doctors in 1847..."
- The three different codes were produced in radically different contexts. Medicine in 1957 was as different from medicine in 1847 as medicine in 1847 was from medicine in 400 BC. We have taught you nothing about Greek medicine, and have not yet gotten to 1957, so we are not expecting detailed, contextualized understandings of medicine in Greece or the 1950s. But don't just speculate blindly: make some effort to defend or document your assertions.
- Make clear arguments, defended with specific, correct, and relevant evidence.
- Your essays must be well organized and clearly written.

- You must use material from at least three readings, from any of the weeks. Paul Starr might be especially helpful.
- You must cite all sources (course readings, lectures, other readings) correctly, with both the complete source and specific page number. If you have any questions, see the information at the MIT Writing Center website. You can pick your own style (e.g. CMS, parenthetical citations, etc.) -- just be accurate, consistent, and complete.
- Please put your name on a title page, but not on any pages of the body of the paper, so that we may grade the papers blind.