



FAQ

Write a Medical School Oath to Fight for Social Justice

1. What is a medical oath?

A medical oath is a series of promises that medical school students make upon beginning and/or graduating from medical school or during other medical school ceremonies.

For example, a medical oath is often recited during the “white coat ceremony,” in which medical students get a short white lab coat and recite a class oath or pledge. This signifies the beginning of the students’ journeys to achieve the long white lab coat, a well-recognized symbol of respect and professionalism.

Students may recite this oath out loud and/or display the oath in highly visible areas, such as on their student identification card, to be reminded of the promises they have made as a healthcare professional.

The promises students make in the oath typically relate to medical ethics and providing the best patient care possible.

2. What is the history of medical oaths?

Most medical oaths are modeled after the [Hippocratic Oath](#), written by Hippocrates, a Greek physician, around 400 BC.

The Hippocratic Oath does not explicitly contain the phrase, “first, do no harm,” which is commonly attributed to it. But it does contain a vow to “benefit my patients according to my greatest ability and judgement, and I will do no harm or injustice to them.”

Western medical schools started using the Hippocratic Oath in the 1700s. Over the centuries, medical schools have adopted modern versions.

One version of a medical oath is the Declaration of Geneva, adopted by the World Medical Association in 1948. It includes calls to “maintain the utmost respect for human life” and “not

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permit considerations of age, disease or disability, creed, ethnic origin, gender, nationality, political affiliation, race, sexual orientation, social standing or any other factor to intervene between my duty and my patient.”

A more humanistic version was written in 1964 by Louis Lasagna of Tufts University, which is used in many medical schools. This oath includes a call to “remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick.”

Today, medical schools continue to refine the oath. Some medical schools have even allowed students to write their own oaths based on personal ethics and beliefs.

3. Are there different kinds of medical oaths?

Across the US, there are different kinds of medical oaths, but all they have the same purpose – to vow to be an ethical healthcare professional.

Most medical oaths are a modern version of the Hippocratic Oath and include promises that better reflect medicine in the 21st century.

Medical oaths tend to differ among schools because of varying interpretations of the Hippocratic Oath.

School officials commonly craft the medical school’s official oath, but it is becoming increasingly popular for [medical students to write their own oath](#) based on their personal ethics and beliefs.

More than half of commencement ceremonies use an oath unique to that school or written by that class, according to a [2018 review](#) of medical school oaths.

“With a wider range of oath texts, content elements are less uniformly shared, so that only three elements (respecting confidentiality, avoiding harm, and upholding the profession's integrity) are present in as many as 80% of oaths. There is less uniformity in the content of oaths upon entry to medical school,” according to the review. “Consistently all of these oaths represent the relationship between individual physicians and individual patients, and only a minority express obligations to teach, advocate, prevent disease, or advance knowledge. They do not reflect obligations to ensure that systems operate safely, for example. None of the obligations in these oaths are unique to physicians.”

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4. Why might medical oaths need updating?

Since medical oaths are a public vow, students may feel the need to update an oath to better reflect their values, beliefs, and opinions.

An oath may need updating because the language is impersonal or vague.

Perhaps the promises stated in the current oath are too broad and unattainable, or the current oath does not address topics that are important to those who will be reciting it, such as health disparities, health inequities, social justice, or racism as a public health issue.

No matter the reason for updating a medical oath, it can be a meaningful experience to reflect on oaths and provide more input on the promises made as a healthcare professional.

Some doctors may worry that the proliferation of oaths could weaken the focus and values of their profession; but the process of updating or writing new oaths may spur medical students to [consider more deeply professional ethics and their sense of mission](#).

“The writing process forces you to step back and think about what it means to be a physician,” [said](#) Karri Weisenthal, Yale School of Medicine, class of 2018. “It was a special moment to recite our oath knowing the thought and care we put into it.”

5. What are some examples of medical oaths?

Here are some other oaths to review:

- [Harvard School of Medicine, 2019](#)
- [Yale School of Medicine, 2020](#)
- [University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, 2020](#)
- [Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, 2021](#)
- [University of Minnesota Medical School, 2021](#)
- [Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University 2021](#)
- [UC Davis School of Medicine, 2021](#)
- [Boston University School of Medicine, 2020](#)
- [Baylor College of Medicine](#)
- [West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine](#)

6. How can students change a medical oath?

Changing a medical oath is a different process at each school.

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Some medical schools encourage students to write their own oaths, while other schools have adopted a modern oath that may or may not be regularly updated.

If you are unsure what your school's oath is, you may Google search "[YOUR SCHOOL NAME] oath" to find or read your school's oath. You may have to email your medical school leaders/administrators to find out which version of the oath is used.

After you find the oath, you may notice some changes that you would like to make.

You may have to reach out to medical school leaders/administrators to start a conversation and get permission to update or write a new oath for your class.

Faculty or diversity, equity, and inclusion personnel may also provide guidance in the brainstorming, writing, and implementing process of creating or updating an oath.

With permission to write your own oath, you'll want to engage your class and designate leaders to fulfill responsibilities, such as:

- A scribe to track and organize everyone's ideas.
- A moderator to help everyone feel heard while avoiding conflicts or disagreements.
- A spokesperson to coordinate with faculty supporters.
- A writer to help write and finalize the new oath.

Begin collaborating with your group on how you might update the oath.

You may meet and openly talk about each other's ideas.

It may also be helpful to create an electronic group document, such as through Google Documents, to share and track ideas.

As you collaborate, remember to practice inclusivity and be respectful of each other's ideas.

Once a new oath has been drafted and approved by school leaders/administrators, contact supportive faculty and begin collaborating on how to implement the new oath, such as having the oath recited at school ceremonies and announcing the new oath to the public through social media and a press release.

You should also explore with faculty how the new oath will be used in the future. For example, will each student class update or write their own oath upon the start of the school year?

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7. How has a medical student helped update or write their class medical oath?

One example is [Abigail Rubio](#).

Rubio, like all medical students, was to start her journey to become a doctor with an oath. But Rubio knew something was missing from the oath.

She and her peers at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, with the guidance of their faculty advisers, wrote their own medical oath and recited it in August 2020 with new emphasis on COVID-19, health care inequities, and racism as a public health crisis.

“We were given a platform to talk about things that medicine should be addressing,” said Rubio, an MD student set to graduate in 2024. “I think it is a great idea to write an oath and set a new standard for your school and for your class and acknowledge that potentially the old oath doesn’t reflect everything that we now feel medicine is and we want to be as physicians.”

[Read Abigail’s full story](#).

8. What happens after changing a medical school oath?

A supportive school leader/administrator or faculty member can help you implement the new oath as appropriate. The new oath may be recited by your class at a school ceremony and displayed on the school’s website.

It may also be displayed in a highly visible area, such as a student identification card, to remind students of the promises they have made a healthcare professional.

You may also post about the new oath on your school’s social media pages.

A press release to announce your new oath to both the school and the public may also be appropriate.

After your new oath has been accepted and implemented, you should explore with faculty how the new oath will be used in the future. Will next year’s student class recite the same oath? Or will they write their own oath to reflect their personal values and beliefs?

Need some inspiration? [Read a real story](#) from a Latina student who changed her medical school oath!

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