

Trust me, I'm a doctor: proposal for a professional doctorate pledge.

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This article considers the need for a professional doctorate pledge that would be relevant to all doctoral awards at higher education level. The proposal includes a discussion around the emergence of the first professional pledge within the medical profession and how the need for a Hippocratic style oath was revived in the later nineteenth century and extended to other professional sectors. The use of pledges is relatively new to higher education, with some universities in the USA recording the use of a graduate pledge from the 1980's. However, there have been a range of reasons for the perceived need for such pledges in higher education. A principal reason would seem to be to emphasis the employment worthiness of its university graduates in terms of motivation and attitude, rather than for more altruistic values and personal integrity. This paper arose from reflections by the author on an ongoing study on the identity of new doctoral graduates, over the summer of 2018 (Milburn et al., 2019). This paper represents the culmination of many discussions around the theme of a doctoral pledge and includes a proposed doctoral pledge for use across higher education.

Keywords: Oath, pledge, professional doctorate, graduate, doctoral identity, higher education

Introduction

This paper is based upon ongoing research on the use and development of professional oaths, pledges and professional codes. The inspiration for the concept of a professional doctorate oath or pledge occurred over the summer of 2018, whilst reflecting upon many years leading a professional doctorate framework and considering the future of doctoral research. On closer investigation, it seemed that there had been others who had developed oaths and pledges within higher education, mostly in the USA and at undergraduate and masters level, which will be discussed later. There are many professional oaths and pledges, which are obligations that can form the basis of a professional code, which if broken, could result in legal or disciplinary action. Many oaths and pledges, however, have no firm basis in mandatory obligations or laws, though are intended as a moral compass by which

professionals gauge and maintain their own integrity. The concept of adopting the values enshrined in a professional oath or pledge is recognised in the literature on social change, where, for example, individuals will take a pledge of allegiance to follow a particular set of moral statements. This has been considered in social and cultural movements such as pledging allegiance to a country or nation. Lifestyle movements such as environmental and animal rights campaigns (see for example the Plastic Pledge for the Green Party and the Conservation International Pledge; web link cited in the references section) have oaths and pledges in order to build a sense of shared commitment to a set of values. (see for example Hulkower, 2010). Some oaths and pledges are compulsory, such as the pledge of allegiance taken by the President of the United States (Sunstein, 1990).

Historical perspective

Research on perhaps the oldest form of pledge is that of the Hippocratic Oath (formed, circa 500. BC). This oath was developed and instituted as a means of differentiating the early Greek physicians from those who were not formally trained in the ways of Hippocrates (Edelstein, 1943). The oath was intended as a code of conduct in order to engender trust in the professional and ethical approach adopted by those taking the oath. The Hippocratic oath was originally made to the Greek gods and has been used variously throughout the ages, normally being reinstated at times where there was felt the need to reinforce the professional ethical standards enshrined in the oath. Most notably for the medical profession, this came at the end of the second world war, where it was found that German medical doctors had taken part in unethical medical experimentation with those incarcerated and murdered by the then Nazi regime (Timmermann, 2002). In 1948, the World Medical Association revised and reinstated the Hippocratic Oath to better meet modern needs for ethical practice, the updated version became known as the Declaration of Geneva or Geneva Oath (WMA, 1948). There has been limited research on the post-graduation impact, though one study noted that newly qualified doctors cited a strong emotional relevance of the oath to their membership of a wider medical profession (Oxtoby, 2016). There have been a number of other professional oaths and pledges developed in order to build trust and foster deeper ethical commitment to a profession. Another example is the nursing profession with the development of the Nightingale Pledge (1893), which was instituted by the Farrand Training School for Nurses in Detroit Michigan, USA (Dock, L and Stewart, I (1920). The Nightingale

pledge has been variously updated, a modern example is used across nursing schools in India (Basavanthappa, 2014).

Latterly, there have been a number of pledges developed within higher education, including a students' pledge to their professionalism in their future career (Manchester College, 1983), and the Harvard Business School MBA Oath to responsible value creation (Harvard, 2015). There have long been pledges for established professions, including law (see for example Washington Courts, 2017) and those in public office, including civil servants in many countries. Latterly pledges have been developed for teachers (Cody, 2007, BBC, 2014) and scientists (Rotblat, 1999). The oaths and pledges for medical doctors, nurses and teachers have been drawn upon in the proposed doctoral pledge as they seem to embody ethical values of responsibility and equality towards others, including teachers and students, which forms a covenant with those witnessing the taking of the pledge (Hulkower, 2010).

An examination of graduate doctoral identity and historical background on the emergence of professional oaths, along with examples of oaths and pledges, is contained in a conference presentation on the identity formation of professional doctorate candidates (Weller, et al., 2018).

Potential benefits and deficits of Oaths for personal and professional practice

In this section, I consider some of the positive and negative aspects of an oath or pledge for personal and professional practice. Firstly, as mentioned by many writers who have charted the emergence of the first oath, named after Hippocrates, it is intended to instill a sense of 'moral compass' and trust, which can be considered in times of complex decision making as well as forming a code of conduct for everyday life. An oath can serve as a useful reference point, and remind individuals of their personal moral obligations. Moreover, as everyone would be held to the same ethical standards, it would also help create an environment where people would be accountable for inappropriate behaviour. Furthermore, an oath or pledge can form a life-long vehicle for reaffirming understanding of one's personal and professional integrity.

It says something that in the professions of medicine and nursing an oath of fidelity is important enough to recite at graduations...Perhaps the symbolic act of adopting some kind

of oath is a statement that we want to take the practice of our profession more seriously (Laplante, 2004).

The quote by Laplante (2004) captures much of the sentiment of many writers on the theme of oaths and pledges, which is to invoke feelings and beliefs of belonging and community values.

Deficits might include:

In certain circumstances blind adherence to an oath or pledge could lead to blocking academic and scientific advance through misinterpretation; for example, advances in genetic engineering have often led to complex ethical issues about how far researchers should venture in designing new life (MacLeod, 2006).

In terms of enforcing an oath, it could be considered as unsatisfactory to have no consequences for breaching the oath, yet it would be difficult to penalize violations. An oath could become too restrictive through political interpretation that may impede research; stem cell research might be such an example.

Oaths and pledges may make a particular group of people look good, without actually changing their behaviour. Finally, a major problem with an oath or pledge is that to abide by it offers no tangible reward compared to possible monetary or other benefits possible with alternative types of behaviour.

Oath, Pledge, Promise or Vow?

There seems to be subtle differences between the terms oath, pledge, promise and vow. The oath would seem to involve an oath to a deity or deities to follow and adhere to particular moral commitments; the Hippocratic Oath for example was intended to be made to the Greek gods Apollo, Asclepius, Hygieia, Panacea and all the other gods and goddesses (Miles, 2005). The pledge and promise would seem to be more related to making a personal commitment to follow a particular set of moral guidelines. The vow could seem to be similar to the pledge or promise, though may include a vow to follow or recognise a deity or deities, as seen for example marriage vows. These differences would seem to be largely semantic in nature as the Hippocratic Oath as transformed over the years to exclude religious references, as can be seen in the World Medical Association latest medical practitioner oath, known as the Geneva

or Physicians Oath (WMA, 2017). However, this does not stop particular religious faiths from developing their own Hippocratic style oath and oaths developed by the Muslim and Jewish faiths have evolved (see for example the Oath of a Muslim Physician (IMA,1977) and the Jewish oath (Maimonides Oath) (Tan and Yeow, 2002). In the case of this discussion, the pledge is considered as less contentious as it is not necessarily based upon commitment to a deity of deities but upon personal commitment and to others witnessing and/or within a particular community, professional or otherwise (Peron, 2001).

A Pledge for all doctoral graduates

This proposal is for the formation of a Professional Doctorate Pledge. The pledge would be taken at the time of graduation, preferably spoken by the individual graduate as part of the graduation ceremony. The Professional Doctorate Pledge would be taken voluntarily and apply to all doctoral awards and pathways where no oath or pledge currently exists. The meaning of 'professional' in context of a doctoral pledge, is intended to recognise that a doctoral award may be likely to lead graduates into positions of responsibility, either in the world of academia or within commerce and industry.

Why a pledge is required for University doctoral graduates

The rationale for this proposal is based upon the formation of understanding of the professional doctorate and the role of the university in awarding this life changing credential. It contains many of the ethical sentiments found in the earlier professional codes. The identity of the individual changes with the legal right to replace Mr, Ms, Mrs or Miss with the letters Dr. There is arguably a social endorsement that is also transferred in gaining this award. The doctoral title is normally based upon completing a research project that is carried out over a 3-5 year period and is granted for life. There would seem to be no further ethical responsibility involved in gaining and using a doctoral title long after one has completed the research upon which it was based. Indeed, there is no recommended ethical code of conduct for those newly acquiring a doctorate. The Professional Doctorate Pledge shown below is intended to encourage life-long personal transformative change in ones role in society and to represent a moral compass within which to show ethical leadership.

This discussion paper will form the basis for ongoing research on graduate identity and perceptions of impact of professional oaths and pledges.

THE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE PLEDGE

- **AS A GRADUATE ADMITTED TO THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF**
- **I SOLEMNLY PLEDGE BEFORE ALL HERE TODAY (OPTION: AND DEITY OR DEITIES) THAT:**
- **I WILL RESPECT THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING, AUTONOMY AND DIGNITY OF OTHERS.**
- **I WILL NOT DISCRIMINATE BY AGE, DISABILITY, CREED, ETHNIC ORIGIN, GENDER, NATIONALITY, RACE, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, SOCIAL STANDING OR ANY OTHER FACTOR THAT MAY UNFAIRLY DISADVANTAGE OTHERS, IN ALL MY ACTIONS AND DECISION MAKING**
- **I WILL RESPECT THE CONFIDENTIALITY OF INDIVIDUALS WHERE THERE IS NO RISK OF HARM TO OTHERS, WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF GOOD ETHICAL PRACTICE.**
- **I WILL PRACTISE MY PROFESSION WITH CONSCIENCE, COMPASSION, INTEGRITY AND DIGNITY AND IN ACCORDANCE WITH GOOD ETHICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE.**
- **I WILL GIVE TO MY TEACHERS, COLLEAGUES AND STUDENTS THE RESPECT AND GRATITUDE THAT IS THEIR DUE.**
- **I WILL SHARE MY KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMANITY.**
- **I WILL ATTEND TO MY OWN HEALTH, WELL-BEING AND ABILITIES IN ORDER TO PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL SERVICE OF THE HIGHEST STANDARD.**
- **I WILL NOT DO ANYTHING EVIL OR MALICIOUS AND I WILL NOT KNOWINGLY ASSIST IN MALPRACTICE.**
- **I MAKE THESE PROMISES SOLEMNLY, FREELY AND UPON MY HONOUR.**

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