

# An Updated Perspective on the Medical Profession Through Mythological Health Figures: Narrative-Based Ethics Teaching in Medical Education

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## ABSTRACT

Professionalism in the medical profession is a complex concept that encompasses not only knowledge and skill adequacy but also ethical values, attitudes, and professional identity formation processes. Instilling ethical medical values and professional identity formation in the process of becoming a “good physician” is crucial in medical education. In the modern era, “beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice” are generally defined as the four fundamental principles of medical ethics. However, modern medical values encompass both ethical and professional values from a broader perspective. This compilation of values aims to answer the question of whether the possibilities of narrative medicine, using mythological figures related to health throughout history, can be utilized in teaching and applying ethical and medical values in the modern era. To this end, modern medical and ethics principles have been paired with mythological archetypes related to health and healing throughout history, such as Apollo, Asclepius, Hygieia, Panacea, Telesphorus, and Isis, presenting a comprehensive framework that supports reflective learning and professional identity development for medical students and all physicians. We strongly believe that

understanding the relationship between mythological figures and ethical and professional values will contribute to solving ethical problems for today's physicians and help maintain and strengthen their professional identity.

**Key Words:** Medical profession, mythological figures, ethical values, medical education, narrative medicine.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of professionalism in the medical profession encompasses not only knowledge and skill adequacy, but also ethical values, attitudes, their applications, and the process of professional identity formation [01,02]. In the modern era, medical education increasingly recognizes that being a “good physician” requires more than just acquiring knowledge and technical skills; it also involves developing professional values, ethical sensitivity, and reflective capacity [03,04]. Therefore, professional identity formation has become an important concept in the modern medical education literature [05]. However, fundamental ethical values such as beneficence, justice, and integrity are often perceived by students as abstract or distant rules rather than moral commitments by which physicians live [06]. Traditional didactic approaches may be insufficient for

developing a deep ethical understanding or moral imagination [07]. As a result, there is growing interest in educational strategies that emphasize meaning-making, reflection, and narrative engagement [08].

Narrative-based learning (or narrative medicine) in medicine has emerged as a powerful pedagogical approach in medical education and has come to the fore as an educational method that enables medical students to engage complex ethical concepts through symbolic meaning and storytelling [08,09]. Throughout history, certain important figures related to health and healing have been known in mythology, such as Apollo, Asclepius, Hygeia, Panacea and Telesphorus. Although the mythological narratives associated with these figures originate centuries ago, they still possess relevant characteristics today in terms of the mission they represent in terms of ethical values. In this sense, each of them has become a highly important and useful representative for contemporary narrative medicine.

In the modern era, “beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice” are generally defined as the four fundamental principles of medical ethics [10]. However, modern medical values draw from a broader framework encompassing both ethical and professional values. The purpose of this article is to discuss the potential use of mythological health figures as tools of narrative medicine to teach modern medical values such as beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, honesty, compassion, and accountability [11,12]. The study matches modern medical and medical ethics principles with mythological archetypes such as Apollo, Asclepius, Hygieia, Panacea, Telesphorus, and Isis, and explores the possibilities of an integrative framework that supports reflective learning, moral reasoning, and professional identity development for medical students and all physicians [13].

### **Medical Professionalism and Core Ethical Values**

International documents define the medical profession as a commitment to ethical

practice, patient benefit, social justice, and professional competence [02]. Fundamental ethical principles such as beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for autonomy, and justice form the normative basis of clinical ethics [11]. In addition to these four principles, contemporary frameworks and works emphasize values such as integrity, compassion, accountability, and lifelong learning [14-16]. These values are consistently emphasized in competency-based education models such as CanMEDS and the GMC's Good Medical Practice [15,17]. However, despite this conceptual clarity, translating ethical principles into professional attitudes and behaviors remains a pedagogical challenge [18].

### **Narrative-Based Learning and Mythology in Medical Education**

Narrative-based learning is based on the idea that people understand moral experience through stories rather than abstract rules [09]. In medical education, narrative approaches have been shown to enhance empathy, ethical reflection, and professional identity formation [08,13]. Myths represent one of the oldest narrative forms used to convey moral knowledge, social norms, and cultural values. The archetypal characters and symbolic structures of mythology enable medical students and, of course, physicians to engage with ethical dilemmas in a non-dogmatic but emotionally resonant way [07]. In medical education, myth-based narratives can provide the following:

- Encourage ethical thinking and discussion [06],
- Ensuring role modeling [19],
- Supporting the internalization and application of professional values [05].

### **Mythological Health Figures as Ethical Archetypes**

#### **Apollo**

In mythology, Apollo is the Olympian god of health and, as such, is the first god associated with health [20]. As a multifaceted god associated with truth, prophecy, light, music, order, harmony, and light, he is also directly

linked to the concepts of health and disease. Apollo's relationship with medicine is notable for his dual character as both the source of disease and the bearer of healing power [21]. In this respect, the god Apollo is closely related to the contemporary ethical principle of the physician's duty to determine his limits without causing harm.

In Homer's Iliad (8th century BC), Apollo is depicted as a god who sends a plague upon the Achaeans. This narrative reveals that in ancient times, illness was interpreted as divine punishment or the result of disruptive behavior (Homer, Iliad, I.43-52). However, the same god was also accepted as a power that could eliminate diseases and enable healing [22]. This duality can be seen as a metaphor for the dilemmas and ethical dilemmas in healing processes, such as illness-healing, loss of health-achieving health. One of the most concrete examples of Apollo's relationship with health is reflected through his son, Asclepius. Asclepius eventually became the principal god of medicine and healing, but Apollo's role as teacher and protector was decisive in his attainment of this position. According to mythological narratives, Asclepius learned the art of medicine from both Apollo and the wise centaur Chiron [23]. This result reflects the ancient view that medical knowledge was of divine origin but could be taught as an art. Apollo is a mythological figure who transmits knowledge. Asklepios' educational process reflects a model of knowledge transfer derived from Apollo's teaching. Apollo's existence as a mythological figure strengthens the historical and symbolic context of the medical education process and the mission of teaching. Thus, Apollo in mythology can be associated in a modern context with, on the one hand, defining the limits of the physician with respect for non-maleficence and patient autonomy, and on the other hand, competence and teaching and transmitting it. Respect for patient autonomy, a modern concept, represents the epistemic enlightenment necessary for informed

decision-making in the mythological symbolism of the god Apollo. Informed and voluntary decision-making is based on the condition that the patient is enlightened. Apollo's symbolism of light and truth coincides with the transfer of medical knowledge to the patient and the removal of uncertainty.

The Hippocratic Oath contains the fundamental principles of medical ethics, while initially, oaths were sworn to gods such as Apollo, Asclepius, Hygieia, and Panacea. These mythological references show that the metaphorical relationship between the medical understanding of that period and the ethical ideal began in ancient times. The god Apollo is also one of the gods sworn to in the Hippocratic Oath [24,25].

### **Asclepius**

Asclepius is known in mythology as the god of medicine and health. The first known source of information about Asclepius, as with Apollo, is Homer's work from, the Iliad (8th century BC). In this work, Homer refers to Asclepius not as a "divine figure" but as a "perfect physician". Before Asclepius, Apollo was seen as the source of healing, and Asclepius took over this role as Apollo's son. On the other hand, Asclepius, who was half-god and half-human (his father was a god and his mother Coronis, was human, is associated with healing. In this case, "Asclepius is a mediator between the divine origin of medicine and humanity". This intermediary role gained further importance over time with the cult that formed around him, and he was deified through the legendary stories about him [23,26].

According to mythology, Asclepius, whose symbols are the sacred snake and staff (Figure 1), is the son of the god Apollo and learns the science of medicine. While Apollo was previously seen as the source of healing, his son Asclepius took on this role. Asclepius' staff, accepted as the symbol of medicine, is wrapped by a single snake. The snake is Asclepius' sacred animal [27].



**Figure 1: Asclepius, the god of medicine and health.**

Asclepius has two more important characteristics. The first is that his name appears among the sacred gods in the original Hippocratic Oath [24]. The second is that numerous ancient hospitals called Asklepiions were established in Greece and Western Anatolia (Türkiye) in the name of Asclepius [28,29]. The priest-physicians who worked there were called “Asklepiads”. Hippocrates' father and Hippocrates himself were Asklepiads who worked at the Kos Asklepiion. The medical practices at the Asklepiions, which functioned between the 6th century BC and the 6th century AD, were far ahead of the other health centers of their time. In these ancient hospitals, there was an understanding that illness was not caused solely by the disruption of biological mechanisms, but had a multidimensional nature, and that healing could be achieved

through a holistic approach that also took into account the psychological and social dimensions of health [30]. Thus, the Asklepiions can be considered the first health centers in history to apply a biopsychosocial approach. Asclepius, half-god and half-human, was seen not only as the god of the gods but also as the god of health and healing for all people at that time, which made him a kind of folk hero [23]. In this sense, Asclepius was a precursor to egalitarian and fair practices in healthcare that did not discriminate against patients, in the modern sense of the term [19]. Both Asclepius in mythology and the Asklepiads working in ancient hospitals can be considered prototypes of reliable, competent, fair, and responsible physicians serving the public.

### The Snake and the Staff

Asclepius never leaves his staff entwined with a snake by his side; he takes it with him wherever he goes and leans on it when he is tired (Figure 1). The staff symbolizes that medical education cannot be learned in a short time, but that physicians need to continue learning and gaining experience until they grow old and lean on the staff. Its contemporary representation is lifelong and continuous learning. On the other hand, the snake is a sacred symbol associated with rejuvenation, renewal, and long life on the one hand, and health on the other, due to its shedding of skin and carrying both poison and antidote in ancient civilizations [31]. Like the snake, the physician must always be careful and cautious, renew themselves, and remain current with advances in medicine [32].

### Hygieia

In mythology, Hygieia (Figure 2) is the daughter of Asclepius and the goddess of health, cleanliness, sanitation, and hygiene. Her name is the origin of the word “hygiene” [33]. While her father Asclepius healed the sick, his daughter Hygieia ensured protection from disease and a healthy life. Hygieia’s role was to emphasize the importance of cleanliness and hygiene in preventing disease [34]. Hygieia is also a goddess mentioned in the original (historical) Hippocratic Oath [24]. In this respect, her historical importance is undeniable. In the modern sense, Hygieia can be considered the historical precursor of preventive medicine, which is the concept of health directed at preventing diseases before they occur. Characteristics such as protection, care, and their reflections, compassion and empathy, are symbolized by Hygieia.



Figure 2: Hygieia, the goddess of health, cleanliness, sanitation, and hygiene.

In ancient texts, Hygieia's name appears particularly in the principles of physicians to “do no harm and protect the patient” [33]; this

can be associated with the modern ethical framework of non-maleficence and autonomy. In this context, the figure of

Hygieia represents modern ethical values such as preventive healthcare and respect for the patient's lifestyle choices through a mythological metaphor.

### Panacea

Panacea is another daughter of Asclepius and is the goddess responsible for healing plants and natural remedies that relieve all types of pain. The word Panacea means “cure-all” [33]. Panacea is also one of the goddesses sworn to in the Hippocratic Oath [24]. Panacea is a metaphor for the application of all beneficial options in treatment processes. Panacea thus establishes a symbolic link between the mythological representation of the ideal of maximizing benefit in treatment and the concept of “beneficence” in modern medical ethics [11].

### Telesphorus

Telesphorus was the youngest son of Asclepius, the god of healing (convalescence), the god who bestows energy and healing power. Telesphorus was a god of healing and was depicted as a small figure wearing a large headdress [33]. This child god figure, whose name means “to heal, to get back on one's feet” in Greek, is depicted as a child wearing a long robe [35]. Telesphorus is particularly associated with the convalescence period of patients and can

therefore be linked to processes that facilitate their recovery, rehabilitation, and attainment of functional well-being. Thus, the completion of healthcare can be equated with the modern ethical principle of “reliability”.

### Isis

Isis is the mother of the god Horus, sister of Osiris, and faithful wife in ancient Egyptian mythology [36]. Isis gives birth to Horus after a long pregnancy and difficult delivery in the Nile Delta. As her child grew, she had to protect him from the god Set and many other dangers such as snakes, scorpions, and diseases. Isis's reputation as a merciful goddess, willing to alleviate human suffering, greatly contributed to her appeal. In ancient Egypt, Isis's presence alongside women in childbirth was important for her motherhood and protective aspects [37].

Isis is closely associated with the symbolism of the healing mother throughout history. In a modern sense, Isis's mission can be linked to patient-centered care, protection, palliative and preventive medicine, and can also be seen as corresponding to the biopsychosocial model in holistic medicine and health from these perspectives. Table-1 below contains a comparison of modern medical values with the values represented by mythological figures related to health.

**Table-1: The relationship between modern medical ethics and professional values and the values represented by mythological figures in health-related history.**

Modern Medical Value	Summary Definition	Mythological Figures	Reason for Matching (Symbolic Meaning)
Beneficence	Ensuring the patient's well-being under all circumstances	Asclepius, Panacea	The healing, therapeutic aspect of Asclepius; the restorative purpose of medicine. Panacea is the mythological representation of the ideal of maximizing benefit in treatment.
Non-maleficence	Avoiding the risk of loss	Apollo (dual nature), Hygieia	Apollo's dual role as both bringer of disease and healer, the ethical limits of intervention; Hygieia's protective medical practices
Respect for Patient Autonomy	Informed and voluntary decision	Apollo	Symbolism of enlightenment, conscious choice
Justice	Equality, fairness, rejection of discrimination	Asclepius	Social order, impartiality of justice, the right to health for all

Integrity and Veracity	Transparency, trust	Asclepius	Medical skills, good medical practice
Competence and Continuous Learning	Professional competence and development, education and skill development	Apollo, Asclepius, Asclepius' staff with a snake	Apollo's transfer of knowledge to his son, guidance, Asclepius' learning of medicine and attainment of mastery, renewal through the snake's shedding of its skin, learning continuing until the staff is placed on the ground
Compassion and Empathy	Humanistic Approach	Hygieia, Isis	Hygieia: protection, care, preventive health; Isis: emotional and empathetic approach to patients
Professional Accountability	Responsibility to society and the profession	The lineage of Asclepius (collective heritage), the Asclepiads	The intergenerational ethical responsibility of medicine, not just individual responsibility
An Egalitarian Approach to Health	Healthcare for all	Asclepius	Providing healthcare services to all people without discrimination
Preventive Medicine	Preventing illness before it occurs	Hygieia	Preventing disease through hygiene, sanitation, and cleanliness
Reliability	Comprehensive results of the treatment process, completion of reliable healthcare	Telesphorus	The completion of processes that will enable the patient's recovery, rehabilitation, and return to functional well-being
Professional Identity	Professional Medical Identity	Asclepius	The origin of ethical and professional identity, ancient hospitals named after him, his inclusion in the Hippocratic Oath

### Educational Implications of Using Mythological Figures in Narrative Medicine

Integrating narratives based on health figures from mythology into medical education and medical ethics curricula can increase student participation and interest and facilitate a deeper ethical understanding [07]. These approaches encourage reflection on ethical and moral complexity, professional responsibility, and the evolving identity of the physician [13]. Narrative and mythology-based learning is particularly suitable for the early years of medical education, when professional identity formation is flexible and values are still being internalized [18]. However, learning and upholding the values of medicine represented by the main mythological figures related to health is important for all physicians, not only during this period but throughout their entire medical education and professional life.

### CONCLUSION

Today, it is obvious that there are problems in both teaching and applying the fundamental ethical and professional values related to medicine in the modern era throughout the medical career. One important way to overcome these problems is to examine narrative medicine [38] and, in this context, the mythological figures related to health in history, to draw inspiration from their missions, and to bring them to the fore as exemplary role models. Mythological narratives offer a culturally rich and pedagogically effective framework for teaching, sustaining, and perpetuating modern medical values. By relating ancient health figures in mythology to modern ethical and professional principles, medical educators can encourage reflective learning, moral reasoning, and the formation of professional identity. Therefore, narrative-based, myth-inspired ethics education is a valuable complement to traditional approaches in medical education [06,08]. We strongly believe that understanding the

relationship between mythological figures and ethical and professional values will contribute to solving ethical problems for today's physicians and will help them acquire, maintain, and strengthen their professional identity.

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