



The Hippocratic Oath Under Pressure: Ethical Reflections on Physician Responsibility in the JFK Autopsy

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Abstract: Importance: The assassination of President John F. Kennedy remains one of the most debated medical events of the twentieth century. Conflicting medical observations and institutional constraints surrounding the autopsy raise enduring ethical questions about physician autonomy and the obligations of the Hippocratic Oath. Objective: To examine the ethical implications of contested medical evidence in the JFK case and to analyze how institutional pressures may affect physician judgment, documentation, and professional responsibility. Evidence Review: Published medical analyses, radiological evaluations, eyewitness accounts, and philosophical work on epistemic responsibility and moral agency were reviewed to assess the ethical challenges faced by physicians involved in the JFK autopsy. Findings: Documented discrepancies between clinical observations at Parkland Hospital and the official autopsy findings at Bethesda Naval Hospital have been noted in the literature. Analyses have also identified radiological and photographic inconsistencies. Philosophical frameworks highlight the ethical obligations of physicians to maintain independent judgment and resist coercive pressures. Conclusions and Relevance: The JFK case illustrates the ethical challenges physicians may face when evidence is contested or when institutional authority constrains professional autonomy. The case underscores the importance of transparency, accurate documentation, and ethical preparedness in politically sensitive medical contexts.

Keywords: JFK, John F Kennedy, Assassination, Ethics, Hippocrates

INTRODUCTION

The Hippocratic Oath has long served as a foundational ethical guide for physicians, emphasizing fidelity to truth, avoidance of harm, and independence of clinical judgment. Yet history reveals moments when physicians have been placed in environments where institutional authority or political sensitivity may challenge these commitments. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy (JFK) provides a compelling case study of such ethical tension. Medical controversies surrounding the event—including conflicting wound descriptions, radiological anomalies, and discrepancies between clinical and autopsy findings—have been documented in the literature (5-10). These issues raise important questions about the ethical responsibilities of physicians when evidence is contested or when institutional pressures may influence medical documentation. Philosophical analyses of epistemic responsibility and moral agency further illuminate these ethical tensions (1-3).

THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH AND PHYSICIAN AUTONOMY

The classical Hippocratic Oath emphasizes truthfulness, avoidance of harm, and independent clinical judgment. Modern interpretations extend these principles to include

transparency, resistance to coercion, and the duty to report anomalies even when they conflict with institutional expectations.

When physicians operate within hierarchical systems—such as the military—these obligations may come into conflict with external authority. The JFK case illustrates how such conflicts may arise and how they can challenge the ethical commitments of medical professionals.

MEDICAL EVIDENCE IN THE JFK CASE

Clinical Observations at Parkland Hospital

Physicians at Parkland Hospital described a small anterior throat wound and a large occipital defect, observations made before any surgical intervention (8, 9). These descriptions were consistent across multiple clinicians and recorded contemporaneously.

Autopsy Findings at Bethesda Naval Hospital

The official autopsy report described a different pattern of injuries, including a large parietal defect and a revised interpretation of the throat wound (6, 7). These findings diverged from the Parkland observations.

RADIOLOGICAL AND PHOTOGRAPHIC INCONSISTENCIES

Published analyses have identified optical densitometry inconsistencies, discrepancies between autopsy photographs and X-rays, and chain-of-custody concerns (5-7). These issues have been discussed in the literature as potential sources of ethical concern regarding documentation and transparency.

ETHICAL DUTIES WHEN EVIDENCE IS CONTESTED

Physicians have ethical duties to report clinical observations accurately, document uncertainties, resist pressures to conform to predetermined conclusions, and advocate for transparency when evidence is disputed. Philosophical work on epistemic responsibility emphasizes that dismissing alternative explanations without examining evidence is ethically problematic (1). These principles apply directly to situations where medical evidence is contested or where institutional narratives may influence clinical interpretation.

INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURE AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

The JFK autopsy occurred under military authority, with physicians subject to command hierarchy. Historical accounts suggest that some medical personnel felt constrained in their ability to report findings freely (10). Philosophical analyses of moral responsibility argue that individuals retain ethical obligations even within coercive systems (2). Physicians cannot ethically defer responsibility to superiors when professional standards are at stake.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MODERN MEDICAL ETHICS

The JFK case highlights the need for transparent autopsy protocols, independent forensic oversight, protections for physicians who report conflicting findings, and ethical training

that prepares clinicians for politically sensitive environments. These measures can help ensure that physicians maintain ethical integrity even under systemic pressure.

CONCLUSION

The assassination of President Kennedy remains historically significant, but its ethical implications for medicine are equally enduring. The case illustrates the challenges physicians face when evidence is contested, when institutional pressures threaten autonomy, and when the Hippocratic Oath is tested by political realities. Ultimately, the case underscores the importance of physician autonomy, accurate documentation, and moral responsibility in the face of contested evidence.

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