

ARTICLE · CULTURA & SAÚDE

Portrait of the Perfect Physician

Precepts from 1595 on the moral virtues and conduct of the good physician

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ABSTRACT

The text reproduces a set of historical precepts, dated 1595, describing the qualities and conduct expected of the ideal physician. In a prescriptive tone, it lists moral and behavioral virtues: the physician should be God-fearing, humble, charitable and prudent, avoiding pride, vanity, envy and flattery. It recommends a love of letters, reading, intellectual curiosity and the avoidance of idleness, along with sober habits of life—moderation in drink and food, the practice of exercise, and abstention from games of chance and from lust. It further advises writing case histories, having some notion of music and physiognomy, and traveling. As for fees, it counsels charging sparingly, attending to the poor for free without failing to collect from those who can pay. This brief text offers an ethical and humanist portrait of the practice of medicine.

KEYWORDS: *ideal physician; medical ethics; virtues; history of medicine; conduct; fees*

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The physician must be God-fearing, humble, neither proud nor vain. Charitable; let him not be a chatterer, a gossip, a flatterer, or envious; but prudent, not overly bold, temperate and given to honesty; a friend of letters and inquisitive; widely read; let him shun idleness and seek to give an explanation for everything. Let him be of sound health, of pleasant appearance, not a heavy drinker—though wine taken in small quantity sharpens the wit,

quickens the memory, and makes men cheerful and affable; let him be moderate in eating, not frequent balls and receptions, and take his amusements in moderation; let him engage in sport, but not play at cards or other games of chance; let him flee lust; let him not lie; let him travel; let him read and write many case histories; let him have some knowledge of music; let him be a physiognomist; let him charge his fees sparingly, working for free for the poor, yet without failing to collect from those who can pay.