

To care or not to care - A physician's compassion and detachment in the Sanskrit medical classics

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In Sūtrasthāna 9.26 of the Carakasamhitā, kindness and compassion are laid out as core characteristics of a good physician. However, this ethic of kindness and compassion generally comes into question when applied to the subject matter of whom a physician should give medical care to, and more importantly, whom he should not treat. Most of the classical medical treatises have much to say on this topic, giving lists of undesirable patients they decree a physician had better avoid. Two main categories of unwelcome patients emerge from the medical authors' descriptions: 1) social outcasts that anyone concerned with their reputation would wish to avoid, and 2) persons whose treatment would fail. It is the latter group that is of special interest in the context of this paper, and in particular those patients whose treatment must fail because they suffer from incurable terminal illnesses. I will discuss the reasons the medical authors give for their advice not to treat terminally ill patients, exploring their guidelines on how a physician may arrive at the decision to avoid or withdraw treatment, and on the exceptions he can make in this process.