**Thesis/ Hypothesis**

Thousands of years have passed since the Byzantine era, yet in today's medical field there are still many of the same questions being asked that were also of concern for the Byzantine medical world. Although our scientific medical knowledge has advanced in many different medical fields, many of the moral and value questions regarding medical practice remain a constant concern.

**Limitations of Study**

There is a lack of Byzantine medical records that are available and for those that are available it is important to consider the bias of the interpretation of the record keeper. For example in Dalla-Vorgia, et al. (2001) article the author discusses that the doctor informs patients of possible surgery complication so that patients have the opportunity to refuse treatment. In this case this is the doctor making the statement; we did not find any accounts of patients stating this as they received this information so it is difficult to know if this was actually practiced by physicians or a philosophical ideal.

In regards to *On Hippocrates*, the article is from an online British Medical Journal that accepts contributions from medical practitioners. The reliability of these sources are questionable as we do not know if these contributors are specialized in the topics they are discussing or if they are just commenting on issues they find interesting.
The Issue of Consent: The Right to Deny Treatment

Consent of a patient is not a new concept to the medical world. As far back as 578 AD there is evidence that patient consent was a serious issue. According to Dalla-Vorgia, et al. (2001):
“Justin II, the emperor of Byzantium, who was suffering from a mental disease and, at the same time, gout, which was probably responsible for his urolithiasis, in the last stages of his life contracted a serious disease which caused retention of the urine with unbearable pains. In the account of John of Ephesus, this disease was caused by the stones which his intestines produced. With cries of agony the emperor was begging the physicians to release him from the unbearable pains or even to kill him. The physicians were not eager to operate because they were afraid they would be punished if they failed. Finally they found a way to proceed and not be held responsible if the emperor died. Besides his reassurance that there would be no serious consequences or danger for them if he died during the operation, they requested, as John of Ephesus relates, that the scalpel for the operation should be given them by the emperor's own hand. That would be a gesture which declared his own free will for the surgical intervention.” (pp.60)

This quote clearly illustrates that even as far back as 578 AD there was a very real concern among doctors that if their patient died that they would be held liable. Even in modern day this remains a very real and serious concern for doctors. Not only can doctors be held liable for a patient's death (if there was not patient consent) but doctors can also lose their medical license and can be sued by the patient’s family. “Every human being of adult years and sound mind has a right to determine what shall be done with his own body; and a surgeon who performs an operation without his patient’s consent commits an assault for which he is liable in damages”(Dolgin, Janet 2010, pp.98).

Another great example of medical consent occurred in the 10th century. According to Dalla-Vorgia, et al. (2001):

“when sub deacon Sergios developed a swelling on the face which the physicians could not cure, he went to the Church of St Lucas Stylites, to be treated. It should be mentioned here that at that time, in the churches or the hospitals that were next to them, authentic therapies were provided by suitably specialized medical personnel. The physician who took care of him and was described as old and magnificent, hesitated and was afraid to operate because of the considerable size of the swelling and the possible complications, although the patient himself was asking with intense movements of his right hand, as he could not speak, to be operated on. At that point, Sergios took the knife and gave it to the physician who proceeded with the incision (apparently it was some kind of abscess because "a basin was filled with malodorous and rotten liquid"). The eminent Byzantine physician Paul of Aegina (7th century) also expresses his own opinion that if the result of the operation seems unpredictable, the surgeon must make the patient aware of the possible danger and only then proceed with the operation, presumably thus giving the patient an opportunity to refuse it.” (pp.60)
Both of the above quotes clearly demonstrate that patient consent is by no means a new concept and that even during antiquity doctors could be held liable if their patients did not clearly understand the possible consequences of a procedure. Whether doctors wanted patient consent “because of respect for their patients or because of fear of the consequences for themselves, at least some doctors sought informed consent, and even informed request, from their patients before treating them” (Dalla-Vorgia, et al., 2001, pp.61).

The Byzantine view of mental health and insanity

According to Michal Doles (1984) “insanity was generally explained according to the two fundamental theories of the humors and the spirits. Madness was produced by an imbalance of the humors, particularly an excess of black bile, which caused melancholy” (pp.138). Although this type of explanation for a depressed mental condition is now thought of as rudimentary, it is not all that different than our current view of mental disorders today. Although current medical opinion may not discuss things such as unbalanced humors, it is not uncommon to hear of someone having a chemical imbalance. We now may be more educated scientifically and have a greater understanding of the mind, and neurotransmitters, but doctors are still trying to “balance” their patients with the use of drugs such as antidepressants.

Another interesting fact according to Doles (1984) is that:

“in the medical literature, there are a number of anecdotes about famous doctors who detected, by feeling the pulse, an undisclosed love as the source of a patient's melancholy and were able to cure the patient. These stories of pulse diagnosis are certainly not evidence of "psychiatry," but they are interesting instances of the physiological understanding of psychic illness.” (pp.139)

This quote illustrates how Byzantine doctors may have been more advanced, and have more similarities
to our current day views than once thought. This quote clearly demonstrates that Byzantine doctors had somewhat of a holistic understanding of the body. This type of belief is currently re-entering the medical world today. Currently psychologists and doctors are starting to believe that in order for someone to be truly being of optimum health, they must be healthy in all domains of their life: social, psychological, and biological. This current view is not all that different from the holistic view that Byzantine doctors had. As stated above it is very evident in the literature that Byzantine doctors were aware of the medical effects that could occur due to someone’s unhappiness for example sadness from a broken heart.

**Contradictions in Medical Ethics**

For example, Byzantine physicians believed in the Hippocratic Oath of “Do no harm” and “Absolute regard for life”. In terms of controversial procedures such as abortion, Byzantines believed that the fetus was an individual human being that had its own right to life. But, evidence has been found of such practices taking place regardless of this ideology. Empress Theodora for example was known to have had many abortions and been given abortive drugs.

“The Empress Theodora (fig. 1), wife of Justinian I, a well-known personality of Byzantium, underwent some abortions before her marriage. According to the scurrilous account by the historian Procopius about the years when she lived as a prostitute, the use of abortifacients persisted. Ingredients for these drugs were available and common in the 6th c. She was accustomed to use all the abortive techniques, whenever she had to face such difficulties.” (Poulakou-Rebelakou, 1996, pp.22)

What remains contradictory is that the same “Father of Medicine” who wrote the Hippocratic Oath also wrote a treatise entitled: “On the Nature of the Child” which provided advice on how to induce abortions and was full of tips and tricks on how to “expel the seed”. The contradictory message on the ethics surrounding abortion during the Byzantine era still exists in our society today. We may not have laws that enforce banishment or death, but we do remain in a culture that has passionate views on the issue.

As we have discussed through this paper, many of the Byzantium practices in health are very
similar to what we experience today. An example of medical tools that follow this theory are as follows:

This is an image of a vaginal speculum. The shape and function has been refined for today’s standards but remain relatively the same. (University of Virginia Health System)
These are surgical scalpels. (University of Virginia Health System)

**Conclusion/ Relation to contemporary society**

As in Byzantine time, medicine in contemporary society still carries many controversial themes. The debate of quality of life over longevity still holds true across the globe. The doctors in the Byzantine period followed the Hippocratic Oath to uphold absolute regard for life, so whether the patient was in pain and suffering the doctors still did everything they could to keep that patient alive. In our modern day we still struggle with the same issues, our modern technology helps us to prolong life of the patient but does not in many cases help to improve their quality of life. When faced with situations that cannot be understood in our society as with the Byzantines, we tend to throw a mental illness label on the patient. While trying to keep the patients best interests in mind, regardless of what a doctors feels they needs to do, the bottom line is the patients right to choose the method of treatment that they believe is appropriate for them.