



Online Ethics Course

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Topic 12

Essentials of public health and policy



Intended learning outcomes

After completing the topic, learners should be able to:

1. Describe key concepts relevant to public health and policy
2. Understand how ethical reasoning relates to public health



Why study public health ethics?

- Public health issues can affect anyone; however, public health decisions concern populations more than individuals and raise different issues from those occurring in routine clinical practice
- Ethical issues inevitably arise – e.g., when balancing the needs of populations against the rights of individuals



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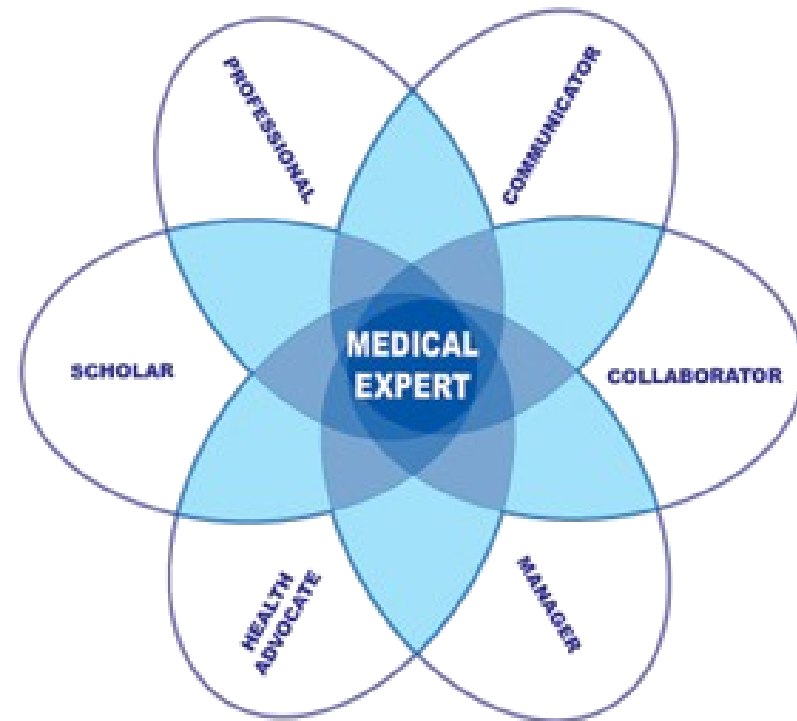
Regardless of who you are, public health ethics can impact on you, and public health practitioners frequently face ethical dilemmas, such as

Balancing individual rights vs population impact, or questioning resources for care of the elderly, or the impact of climate change on human health, especially on the next generation, and asking whether government does enough; investing in long-term health promotion and disease prevention vs treating the growing burden of chronic disease; making difficult decisions in front of patients, having to explain why a certain test/treatment is not available to them



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A public health specialist
could be working in any
of these roles ...



(Frank JR. (Ed.), 2005)



Cont.

- Until recently, public health ethics was seen as a subset of medical ethics, but the formation and management of programs and policies that protect the health of a community are clearly different from the diagnosis and treatment of disease at the core of clinical medicine.
- In recent years, public health professionals have begun to articulate an ethic that guides agencies and communities in the decisions people make to help protect their health
- <http://bmcmethics.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1472-6939-15-73>



Public health vs clinical medicine

- S/he may need to fulfil a number of different roles, which do not have quite the same goals as clinical medicine



Clinical Care vs Public Health

Aspect	Clinical care	Public health
Main aim	Treat sick individuals (cure)	Prevent healthy individuals from getting ill (prevention)
Beneficiaries	Individuals (healthy or sick) and families	Population (community)
Scope	Clinical care, diagnosis, and treatment	Health education, health promotion, and community-based interventions
Fields (specialties)	Internal medicine, surgery, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, etc.	Epidemiology, health promotion, biostatistics Occupational health, etc.
Guidance	Clinical guidelines, hospital policies, etc.	PH guidelines, regulations, laws



Clinical Care vs Public Health (2)

Aspect	Clinical care	Public health
Examples of ethical issues and questions	<p>Issues related to the individuals' right to decide (autonomy), privacy and confidentiality, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- When is it ethical to disclose a patient's medical information?- How to decide which patient should have which service (e.g. an ICU bed)?	<p>Issues related to the tension between the individual rights (interests) and the public good (interests)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- When is it ethical to limit the freedom of movement of a patient with an infectious disease (e.g. in case of pandemic)?- Do parents have the right to refuse vaccinating their children?



Clinical vs Public Health Ethics

	Clinical	Public Health
Situations	Patient-Provider interactions	Institutions and populations
Key Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Autonomy• Patient rights• Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interdependence• Participation• Scientific Information



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- In clinical practice, interactions are between the patient and the health care professional
- Public health is about how whole societies operate, and how each person relates to others and how members of a populace interact with institutions; key situations concern interactions between institutions and populations or communities
 - E.g., about the identification, analysis, and resolution of ethical problems arising in public health practice and research



The ethics of public health

- Like all disciplines, public health ethics has its own specific terms and ways of organising and explaining things
- PHE can be divided 3-ways: in philosophical, religious or guiding principle terms
- The next few slides expand on some of the terms and concepts



Guiding principles

Philosophical

- Deontology
- Utilitarianism
- Rights-based theory
- Virtue ethics
- Casuistry
- Feminism
- Social-contract theory
- Principlism etc.

Religious

- Jewish Ethics
- Christian ethics
- Islamic ethics & jurisprudence
- Other world religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism etc.

Guiding Principles

- Utility
- Efficiency
- Liberty
- Transparency
- Participation
- Review and revise
- Effectiveness
- Fairness
- Reciprocity
- Solidarity



Values and Beliefs

- It is essential to have a process for ethical reasoning in public health that distinguishes between facts, values and principles
- Sometimes, personal values and beliefs have to give way in order to help promote public good; however, beliefs and values often overlap
- Public health roles are often political; however, even if the public health specialist is a civil servant, s/he has to show respect for professional codes of ethics



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- In the West, value is placed on personal autonomy and freedom, which might result in low standards of conformity / compliance to public health advice
- Belief is generally something personal, whereas values are either personal or collectively held; from a policy perspective, values are more important than belief, but beliefs may well influence individual behaviour and health choice



Cont.

- Public health is charged with trying to ensure that as a society, we take appropriate collective action to try and ensure that health policies are meaningful and effective
- Health may be defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being (i.e., more than just the absence of disease or infirmity)
- Communities function well if respect is shown for the interdependence of its members
- Public health not only seeks to assure the health of communities; it also recognises that the health of individuals matters to the life of the community



‘Public good’

- To try and achieve some kind of balance in achieving ‘public good’, the following set of guiding principles apply:



12 guiding principles

1. Public health principally addresses the fundamental causes of disease and requirements for health, aiming to prevent adverse health outcomes
2. PH should achieve community health in a way that respects the rights of individuals in the community
3. PH policies, programs, and priorities should be developed and evaluated through processes that ensure an opportunity for input from members of the community
4. PH should advocate and work for the empowerment of disenfranchised community members, aiming to ensure that the basic resources and conditions necessary for health are accessible to all



Cont.

5. Public health should seek information needed to implement effective policies and programs that protect and promote health
6. PH institutions should provide communities with information needed to make decisions on policies or programs and obtain the community's consent
7. PH institutions should act on information in a timely manner within the resources and the mandate given to them by the public
8. PH programs and policies should incorporate a variety of approaches that anticipate and respect diverse values, beliefs, and cultures in the community



Cont.

9. PH programs and policies should be implemented in a manner that most enhances the physical and social environment
10. PH institutions should protect the confidentiality of information that could harm an individual or a community; exceptions must be justified
11. PH institutions should ensure the professional competence of their employees
12. PH institutions and their employees should engage in collaborations and affiliations in ways that build the public's trust and the institution's effectiveness



What matters most in public health?

Public health policy has to consider:

- Public vs. individual rights; scarcity of resources; socio-political factors such as poverty, illiteracy, minority issues; vulnerable populations; abuse of power (the 'Nanny State' vs public engagement); socio-cultural factors such as local beliefs; international guidelines; the role of families and community leaders; urgency to contain public health threats; inequalities (national and international)
- This is a very wide agenda, in stark contrast to primary care, i.e., the day-to-day practice of clinical care focusing on the needs of the individual



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- Putting policies into practice entails making ethical as well as political judgments
- The public health physician has to be mindful of moral boundaries when trying to take account of a range of physical and political constraints
(E.g., the Chief Medical Officer for England was once investigated for professional misconduct in respect of a failed policy, though the case was subsequently dismissed)



Case example

In Countristan, treatment of all TB patients is free. Patients are expected to show to the nearest health center (HC) to receive the treatment under direct observation. The HC keeps a record of 'which patient had which dose'. The TB officer in that region noted that one of the TB patients, Mr. Contagious, did not receive his doses for the last couple of weeks. The Officer approached Mr. Contagious to persuade him to take the doses on time. The patient refused. The Officer presented an official request to the Attorney General (AG) in the region saying that "Mr. Contagious presents danger to the public." The AG issued an order for the arrest of Mr. Contagious, covering the whole duration of the TB treatment programme.

- Which ethical issues arise in this case?



Cont.

- Confidentiality issues with regard to the keeping of individual records
- The use of enforcement / coercion as a matter of public policy
- The potential rights of individual citizens to say 'no'
- The use of physical force and appropriate boundaries for protecting the public good
- Alternative measures that could be taken to protect the health of the community



Guideline

An overall framework for public health policies and programmes can be summarised as:

1. The goal of the public health measure must actually have the potential to improve the public's health
2. The public health measure must be effective in achieving its goals
3. The burdens of the public health measure must be recognized
4. Burdens should be minimized or alternate measures considered
5. The public health measure should be fairly implemented
6. The burdens and benefits should be balanced



Reading suggestions

- http://www.who.int/sdhconference/resources/EquitySDandPH_eng.pdf?ua=1
- <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2307/3528660/abstract>
- https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=lqD-CAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT8&dq=ethics+public+health&ots=R58rAuNNxe&sig=zZvwCZfgSz5vH_SeYiiDiQG8TtY#v=onepage&q=ethics%20public%20health&f=false
- http://annals.org/article.aspx?doi=10.7326/M14-1864&an_fo_ed
- https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=E3c2NG7qTrgC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=ethics+public+health&ots=Yhjs_pP1F7&sig=hPkQZH7wkQ6CpibCkvY1iw4YPM#v=onepage&q=ethics%20public%20health&f=false
- https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=7JxutqCmctUC&oi=fnd&pg=PP2&dq=ethics+public+health&ots=XEPwzko7Dd&sig=eKsBUJYIZwKObQ5uRnG6tm_710A#v=onepage&q=ethics%20public%20health&f=false
- <http://jech.bmj.com/content/56/10/739.full.pdf+html>



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