Guide to Public Health Ethics in Washington County

Created for the Washington County Public Health Advisory Council acting as the Core Ethics Body for the Washington County Public Health Division

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to help decision makers understand the way ethical situations are handled by Washington County Public Health (WCPH). Refer to this guide as often as you need. Use it to learn more about ethics and to understand how the process of ethical decision-making works. With this information, you will be able to help make decisions about ethical situations that arise within the Public Health Division.

Definitions

1. ***Ethics*** is the study or discussion about

    a. What choices WCPH should make and why, and

    b. What ideas should guide the actions of WCPH

2. ***Morality*** refers to the idea of what most people view as right and wrong. These ideas are shared widely in our society.

3. ***Moral claims*** are claims a person makes about their rights and how they expect a situation to go. Their claims are based on moral norms.

4. ***Moral norms*** are guides for how we should all behave. Moral norms are not permanent. These norms are not the same as universal norms or particular norms.

5. ***Universal norms*** are norms that are shared widely by society.

6. ***Particular norms*** are moral norms that apply only to certain communities or professions

7. ***Public health*** refers to the health of the community. It is not specific to the Washington County Public Health Division or its partners.

8. ***Public health action*** refers to an action that is performed by Washington County Public Health.

What is Public Health Ethics?

Public health ethics is about creating policies, programs, and laws that support public health in ways that are moral. While a medical doctor focuses on the individual, public health focuses on large groups of people—also called populations. This means rather than focusing on the rights of a single person when making decisions, public health must look at how actions impact an entire population when making decisions. Public health must decide how restricting a person's rights may be better for the larger whole to promote health or prevent disease

Public Health Ethics vs Bioethics

While public health ethics focuses on the health of the public, bioethics (also called medical ethics) looks at how a decision impacts the well-being of the individual. Bioethics considers a person's right to make their own decisions, as well as fairness, good intention, and doing no harm. The main idea behind bioethics is to make sure that the rights of the individual are respected. The main difference between bioethics and public health ethics is that bioethics is centered around the person rather than the population.

Public Health Code of Ethics

The *Public Health Code of Ethics* is a set of expectations for public health workers and public health workplaces. The core values described below are all important and are not listed in order of importance.

Professionalism and Trust

How well public health policies and actions work depends on how much trust has been earned by the public. This trust is gained through decisions that are based on high ethical, scientific, and professional standards. Public health gains public trust partly because it uses evidence to make decisions. When evidence is lacking, public health works hard to find it. When evidence reveals poor practices, public health works hard to improve those practices.

Sometimes public health professionals must act on a situation without enough scientific information. This is why it is important to have an ethical framework to help make decisions. Public health workers and workplaces focus on having the right tools and skills to work well. They also focus on honesty and making sure their work is not influenced in ways that are not moral. Public health decision makers must be honest in sharing about situations that cause problems in their ability to make decisions.

Health and Safety

Health and safety are essential for all people. Public health workers and workplaces are expected to deal with situations that could be harmful to the public. Public health workers and workplaces are also expected to promote and support public safety, health, and well-being.

Health Justice and Equity

In order to live a healthy life, everyone must have the same chance at making choices that can help them be as healthy as possible. Public health workers and workplaces are responsible for using their skills and knowledge to support equity for all people. This means supporting the same kinds of opportunities for health, no matter the person. This also means supporting additional opportunities for individuals and populations who have a history of being left out of opportunities for health.

Health justice and equity also means making sure that public health activities do not make health inequities worse. Health justice involves fixing the way public health workplaces do things to create more equity related power and wealth. It is difficult for public health to promote health justice in small ways without taking steps to promote in in larger ways.

Interdependence and Solidarity

The health of every individual is connected to the health of every other individual. It is also connected to other living creatures and the health of the environment. Public health workers and workplaces are expected to support positive relationships among individuals and environments. They are also expected to deal with situations that could be harmful to the health of individuals and the environment in which they live. Problems between generations about resources are also issues that may need to be dealt with.

Human Rights and Civil Liberties

Sometimes it can be ethical to use the law to limit behavior in certain situations. However, public health's ethical practices work best when it respects social and cultural norms. This means that public health respects a person's ability to make their own decisions and also a person's right to privacy.

Inclusivity and Engagement

Creating healthy communities means including individuals and groups that could be affected by a decision. Public health workers and workplaces are expected to be honest and clear with the public about the decisions they make. They are also expected to include many different individuals and communities in the process of decision making.

References

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