

Public Health Ethics

Definitions:

- Ethics: the study or deliberation about
 - What choices WCPH should make and why, and
 - What moral norms should guide WCPH actions
- Morality: refers to moral norms about right and wrong that are stable and widely shared in society
- Moral claims: the perceived rights or expectations of a stakeholder based on moral norms
- Moral norms: guides for our behavior; not absolute (universal and particular norms)
- Universal norms: widely accepted norms
- Particular norms: moral norms that apply only to certain communities, professions
- Public health: refers to the health of the community and is not specific to the Washington County Public Health Division or its partners
- Public health action: refers to an action initiated or implemented by WCPH

What is Public Health Ethics?

The core of public health ethics concerns the moral justification of policies, programs and the law to protect and promote public health. In contrast with medicine, public health is concerned with populations not the individual. This means that rather than focusing on the rights of individuals when making decisions, public health must look at the implications of an action in terms of impact to an entire population. This often means that public health must consider how limiting or restricting individual rights may benefit the larger whole to promote health or prevent disease.

Public Health Ethics vs Bioethics

While public health ethics is concerned primarily with the health of the public, bioethics (sometime referred to as medical ethics) looks at how a decision impacts the well-being of the individual. Bioethics uses the principles of autonomy, justice, beneficence (good intention), and non-maleficence (do no harm). The primary driver for bioethics is to ensure that the rights of the individual person are upheld and respected; person centered rather than population centered.

Public Health Code of Ethics

The following code of ethics was developed in 2002 by the Public Health Leadership Society. It highlights the ethical principles that follow from the distinctive characteristics of public health.

1. Public health should address principally the fundamental causes of disease and requirements for health, aiming to prevent adverse health outcomes
2. Public health should achieve community health in a way that respects the rights of individuals in the community
3. Public health policies, programs, and priorities should be developed and evaluated through processes that ensure an opportunity for input from community members
4. Public health 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
5. Public health should seek the information needed to implement effective policies and programs that protect and promote health
6. Public health institutions should provide communities with the information they have that is needed for decisions on policies or programs and should obtain the community's consent for implementation
7. Public health institutions should act in a timely manner on the information they have within resources and the mandate given them by the public
8. Public health programs and policies should incorporate a variety of approaches that anticipate and respect diverse values, beliefs, and cultures in the community
9. Public health programs and policies should be implemented in a manner that most enhances the physical and social environment
10. Public health institutions should protect the confidentiality of information that can bring harm to an individual or community if made public. Exceptions must be justified on the basis of the high likelihood of significant harm to the individual or others
11. Public health institutions should ensure the professional competence of their employees
12. Public health institutions and their employees should engage in collaborations and affiliations in ways that build the public's trust and the institution's effectiveness

Framework for Decision Making

The following steps will be used to guide ethical analyses of public health issues.

1. Analyze the ethical issues in the situation

What are the health risk and harms of concern, who would be impacted, what are the public health goals, is there a source or scope of legal authority

2. Evaluate the ethical dimensions of the alternate courses of action

Identify moral norms, general moral considerations and ethical principles that may provide guidance about what to do

Utilize the following principles in your evaluation

- Utility: does a public health action produce a balance of benefits over harm
- Justice: are the benefits and burdens distributed fairly; do representatives of affected groups the opportunity to participate in decision making
- Respect for individual interests: does the public health action respect individual choices and interests
- Respect for public institutions: does the public health action respect professional and civic roles and values such as transparency, honesty, trustworthiness, promise-keeping, protecting confidentiality and protecting vulnerable individuals and communities from undue stigmatization

Other tools to help with the evaluation include the 4Ps and the Equity Lens

3. Provide justification for a public health action

Present sufficient grounds or reasons for a course of action based on moral norms, ethical principles, professional codes, and previous cases

Consider the following in developing your justification

- Effectiveness: is the public health goal likely to be accomplished
- Proportionality: will the probable benefits of the action outweigh the infringed moral considerations
- Necessity: is it necessary to override the conflicting ethical claims in order to achieve the public health goal
- Least infringement: Is the action the least restrictive and least intrusive
- Public justification: Can public agents offer public health justification for the action or policy that citizens, in particular those most impacted, find acceptable

Grounding Questions

The following grounding questions will be used to assess the distribution of harms and benefits when public health action is taken. Utilizing these grounding questions as part of the decision-making framework allows us to explicitly call out what groups are most impacted by the decision, both positively and negatively, as well as identify who is excluded from the action.

- Who Benefits from this Decision?
 - What groups or individuals benefit most from the decision
- Who is Burdened by this Decision?
 - What groups or individuals are negatively impacted by the decision
- Who is Left Out of this Decision?
 - What groups or individuals aren't being considered in this decision-making process
 - They may not necessarily suffer any negative, or positive, impacts, they're simply not being considered or included