
Ethics in Public Health Practice

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Background

- Academic distinction made between bioethics and public health ethics
- Limited empirical evidence on the extent to which public health practitioners experience ethical challenges in daily work

Project Goals

- Build empirical base for public health ethics
- Identify ethical issues experienced by practitioners
- Gain understanding of methods of resolution and assess utility of decision frameworks

Methods

- Funding from Greenwall Foundation
- Site selection – 10 local health departments selected for breadth of experiences
 - Geographic location
 - Population characteristics
 - Governance structure

Methods - Descriptive Characteristics

Occupation	n
Health Officers	10
Medical/Dental Directors (non-HO)	4
Environmental Health	6
Nursing or Clinic Staff	8
Health Educator	2
Emergency Preparedness	1
Communications/Public Relations	2
Other (LHD employees)	4
County Commissioner/ BOH Member	2
State Employee	6
Total	45

Methods, cont.

- Development of interview protocol
- Semi-structured, mostly face-to-face interviews with 45 practitioners to identify:
 - Ethical issues faced in practice
 - Underlying values
 - Processes for resolution
 - Demographics and personal exposure to ethics

Results

Ease Discussing Ethics

- Few practitioners rely on ethical constructs or use the “language” of ethics
- No difficulty identifying or discussing ethical issues

Ethical Challenges - 5 Major Themes

1) Appropriate Use of Public Health Authority

Balancing public health benefits with individuals' autonomy or businesses' economic viability

2) Decisions Related to Resource Allocation

Choosing among populations/programs

Allocating scarce resources

Allocating practitioners' time

5 Major Themes, cont.

3) Political Interference in Practice

Politics dictates programming, not evidence

Focus on political “issues of the day” rather than community needs

4) Assuring Standards of Quality Care

Across different populations

During emergencies

5 Major Themes, cont.

5) Questioning the Role or Scope of Public Health

Traditional protection from infectious disease

vs. Safety net

vs. Inclusion of social determinants of health

Public Context

- Professional Ethics

Personnel issues, managing employees

Public sector duties

Relationships with private sector

Conflicts of interest

Public Health Values

- Diversity of values, no clear hierarchy or focus across respondents
 - Helping the most vulnerable
 - Using public funds efficiently
 - Being consistent
 - Being data-driven
 - Being fair
 - Greatest good for the greatest numbers of people
 - Personal responsibility

Resources Used to Resolve Ethical Challenges

- Consultation with colleagues
- Reliance on personal experience
- Reliance on personal moral grounding
- Almost no use of formal frameworks

Synthesis

Synthesis

- Practitioners recognize that their work demands nuanced, ethically-laden decisions
- Sense of “doing the right thing” animates practitioners’ daily practice

Synthesis

- Few differences in major types of ethical issues among practitioners and departments
- Practitioners use little formal assistance to process and resolve ethical issues
- Creating effective frameworks to assist practitioners will be a challenge

Contribution to Public Health Ethics

- Deepens understanding of practice challenges
- Recognizes the importance of the “public” context in shaping ethical issues
- Focus on core set of public health values does not reflect practitioners’ values

Next Steps

- Evaluate frameworks for decision-making
- Develop a national survey
 - Representative view of practitioners' ethical challenges
 - Vast heterogeneity in the structure of local public health across states