

Public Health Ethics 1

The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries, Philosophy of Medicine

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John.Coggon@Bristol.ac.uk

Centre for Health, Law, and Society, University of Bristol

[@CHLSBristol](https://twitter.com/CHLSBristol)

“The public health community takes it as an **article of faith** that health must be society’s overarching value. Yet politicians do not always see it that way...

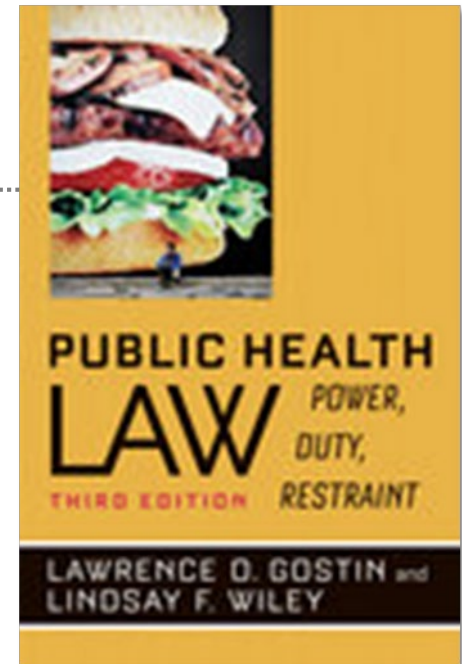
“What is needed is a clear vision of, and rationale for, healthy populations as a political priority.”

Lawrence O. Gostin and Lindsay Wiley, *Public Health Law: Power, Duty, Restraint* (3rd edn) (University of California Press, 2016), p. 7.

Two questions for ethical public health:

- The philosopher’s question: “what makes health public?”
- The activist’s question: “how do we make health public?”

[John Coggon and Lawrence O. Gostin, ‘The two most important questions for ethical public health,’ *Journal of Public Health* \(2020\) 42:1, 198-202](#)



Public Health Ethics: The Emergence of a Field

- Public Health: long understood as ‘the science of social justice’
- Surge of practical and academic interest in Public Health Ethics at turn of century
- Contrasting focus with ‘mainstream bioethics’
 - Critique of a predominance of individualism and too narrow a biomedical focus

- Richard Horton, ‘Offline: Where is the public health leadership in England?’ *The Lancet* (2011) 378, 1060
- Nancy E. Kass, ‘Public Health Ethics: From Foundations and Frameworks to Justice and Global Health,’ *Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics* (2004) 32, 232-242
- Angus Dawson and Marcel Verweij, ‘Public Health Ethics: A Manifesto,’ *Public Health Ethics* (2008) 1:1, 1-2

Offline: Where is public health leadership in England?

On Aug 26, 2011, a public health registrar wrote this message to fellow trainees on a public health Yahoo group: “the situation is terrible and unless something gives, I and skilled trainees and qualified professionals. But the leaders of public health have become divorced from the science that should be shaping public health policy”

Public Health Ethics: From Foundations and Frameworks to Justice and Global Public Health

Nancy E. Kass

Public health ethics in the future will be distinguished from public health ethics in the past by this new subfield being labeled as such, acknowledged, and called upon for service. Ethical dilemmas have been present throughout the history of public health. The question of whether to force Henning Jacobson to be immunized in 1905 in accordance with the 1902 Massachusetts smallpox vaccination law was one of ethics as well as law.¹ How

Before examining the relationship between bioethics and public health, however, a brief background on public health is in order, as well as how this background might suggest that a subfield of public health ethics — distinguished in certain ways from bioethics as a whole — is warranted. Public health is the societal approach to protecting and promoting health. The goal in public health is to improve the health of *communities*, and, in general, public health

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Public Health Ethics: A Manifesto

Angus Dawson and Marcel Verweij

In founding the journal *Public Health Ethics* (PHE) we have three ambitious aims. First, to define and explore the relatively new field of public health ethics. Second, to encourage interdisciplinary reflection upon, and discussion of, moral issues in the theory and practice of public health. Third, to make a contribution to the reorientation of bioethics.

ical issues in relation to all aspects of public health policy and practice. The latter will include normative issues in epidemiological research, health promotion, infectious diseases control, screening, population genetics, resource allocation, health care system reform, vaccinations, environmental and lifestyle factors relevant to health, equity, justice and global health. PHE will interpret the scope

- A mandate to improve population health
- A mandate to address social (health) inequalities
- A shared responsibility for health across society
- A role for government and other partners

See J. Coggon and A.M. Viens, *Public Health Ethics in Practice: An overview of public health ethics for the UK Public Health Skills and Knowledge Framework* (2017), available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-health-ethics-in-practice

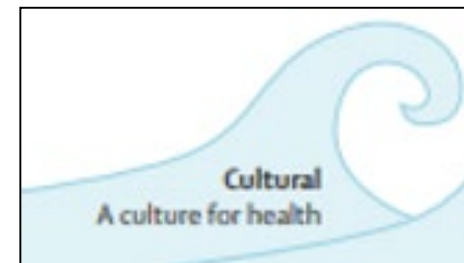


Achieving a ‘Fifth Wave’ of Public Health

“We start from the premise that population health improvement is conditional on a health-promoting societal context.” Meaning...

- The value of health is maximised:
 - Reshape “institutional and social environment”
 - Incentivise health (e.g. fiscal incentives/disincentives)
- Healthy choices are the default
 - Create health-promoting built and commercial environments
- Unhealthy behaviour is minimised
 - Extend tobacco strategies to other unhealthy products

Sally Davies *et al.*, ‘For debate: a new wave in public health improvement,’ *Lancet* 2014 384:1889-95





Cartoon by Birch, featured
in *Private Eye* no. 1484,
30th November—13th
December, 2018, p. 17

Challenges from the 'Nanny State' Debate

- **Principled arguments**
 - Hard/soft paternalism
 - Slippery slopes
- ➔ **Question sustainability**
 - Empirical claims
 - Philosophical claims
- **Non-principled arguments**
 - Arbitrary/incoherent claims
- ➔ **Question rationale**
 - Mistake, or hidden agenda/interest?



John Coggon, *The Nanny State Debate: A Place Where Words Don't Do Justice* (London: Faculty of Public Health, 2018)
www.fph.org.uk/media/1972/fph-nannystatedebate-report-final.pdf