Public Health Ethics

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Overview of Session

Public health, as a vocation, practice, and political responsibility, is seen as an inherently moral endeavour. Dr Richard Horton, editor of The Lancet*, describes public health as 'the science of social justice'. This session introduces and explains the relationships between ethics and public health, focusing on two core 'moral mandates': the promotion of better population health and well-being; and the reduction of health inequalities. It also seeks to explore the idea of public health ethics in a context of real-politics.*

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, you should:
- Understand and be able to explain how ethics relates to public health;
- Recognise the ethical dynamics of questions of general population health protection/ improvement and the reduction of health inequalities;
- Be able to apply this knowledge and understanding in the context of practical and political debates concerning health policy and practice.

Pre-Session Activities

Please complete the following tasks *before* the session. This will take about one to two hours.

You can also see below further materials and resources, and the questions around which we will structure discussion in the session, and may choose to prepare notes on these.

Part 1 – Ethics, Justice, and Shared Responsibility for Health

Conduct the following two tasks, thinking about whether, why, and to what extent health should be an individual or a shared responsibility, with what role(s) then for government.

1. Taking notes against the prompts below, watch the following TED Talk by Dr Sridhar Venkatapuram, of King's College London, on health and social justice:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ex1AqnM6U9Y&feature=youtu.be

- What *empirical* claims does Venkatapuram make?

- What *evidence* does he provide to support them? If none, what evidence would be needed to support them?
- What *causal* claims does Venkatapuram make (i.e. what claims does he make about the causes of ill health)?
- What *normative* claims does Venkatapuram make about responsibility for health and the role of government (i.e. what claims does he make about the aims and scope of individual *versus* legitimate government and social responsibility for health)?

2. Taking notes against the same prompts, listen to the following critical talk by Christopher Snowdon, of the Institute of Economic Affairs, attacking what he perceives as excesses of government intervention, available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-42334300

Part 2 – Ethics in Public Health Policy and Decision-Making

Watch/read the following materials thinking about:

- *How ought ethical values feature in public health policy and decision-making;*
- *How should ethical values be presented to the public: i.e. what levels of transparency and communication are needed, and why?*

- The *UK Pandemic Ethics Accelerator* video 'Differing Roles in an Ecosystem of Ethics', available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6XDOvBPay4
- John Coggon, 'How do we ensure the proper place and visibility of value judgements in public health policy and practice?', pp. 4-5 of John Coggon and Kate Jopling (eds), *The Place of Value Judgements in Public Health Policy and Practice: Reflections on the UK Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, (UK Pandemic Ethics Accelerator, 2022), available here: https://ukpandemicethics.org/collection-of-contributions-from-conference-the-proper-place-of-value-judgments-in-public-health-policy-and-practice-reflections-on-the-uk-experience-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/
- The *UK Pandemic Ethics Accelerator* video 'Who decides and whose voices are heard?', available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hV4NUrLr7Yo

Further materials that you might find useful to consider prior to the class

- The episode of BBC's 'Moral Maze' series on *Public Health* vs *Individual Freedom*: available here.
- Chapters 1 and 2, Nuffield Council on Bioethics, *Public Health—Ethical Issues* (Nuffield, 2007), available here.
- John 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*, (Public Health England, 2017), available here.
- John Coggon, *The Nanny State Debate: A Place Where Words Don't Do Justice*, (Faculty of Public Health, 2018), available here.
- The Faculty of Public Health's explanatory resources on coronavirus regulations in the context of health care and practice, available here.
- Michael Marmot, Jessica Allen, Tammy Boyce, *et al.*, 'Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On,' (Health Foundation, 2020), available here.
- Mehrunisha Suleman, Shreya Sonthalia, Caitlin Webb, Adam Tinson, Martina Kane, Sabrina Bunbury, *et al.*, *Unequal Pandemic, Fairer Recovery: The COVID-19 impact inquiry report*, (Health Foundation, 2021), available here.

Workshop Questions

The session will be run as workshop, with two short presentations, each followed by structured group discussion. This will be based on the above tasks and points raised in the talks, and framed around the following questions. You may choose to come with prepared answers.

Part 1: Public Health Ethics in Theory and Critical Context

1.1 Which ethical values would you argue are important to public health?

1.2 Which further ethical values would you argue are socially important but conflict with public health values, or are harmful to the public's health?

1.3 Explain the 'moral mandates' of public health (protect/improve population health and reduce health inequalities) and whether and why these should be considered ethically important agendas.

1.4 Critics of public health interventions often castigate them as 'nanny statism'. Such positions tend to lack in nuance and coherence. With reference to practical examples, how would you coherently characterise different forms of ethical concern that arise in the context of 'nanny state' debates?

Part 2: Public Health Ethics in Practice

2.1 What has the pandemic taught us about health inequalities and responsibility for health?

2.2 In pandemic responses, what ethical values come into play, and into conflict, and how should these be resolved?

2.3 Think of two policy examples where public health values come into conflict with one another (e.g. where promoting better overall population health exacerbates rather than lessens health inequalities). How should we respond to such conflicts?

Background and Wider Readings

Further to advance your knowledge and understanding of public health ethics, you might find it useful to consult the following resources:

- The journal _Public Health Ethics_ is a primary source of articles on theoretical and practical questions on ethical issues in public health.

- For an historical perspective on the development and defining features of public health ethics as a field of study, see:
    o Bruce Jennings, 'Frameworks for Ethics in Public Health,' _Acta Bioethica_ (2003) 9:2, 165-176
    o Nancy Kass, 'Public Health Ethics: From foundations and frameworks to justice and global public health,' _Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics_ (2004) 32:2, 232-242

- For conceptual and critical perspectives on public health and ethics, see:
    o John Coggon, _What Makes Health Public? A critical evaluation of moral, legal, and political claims in public health_ (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
    o John Coggon and Lawrence O. Gostin, 'The Two Most Important Questions for Ethical Public Health,' (2020) _Journal of Public Health_ 42:1, 198-202, available here
    o John Coggon, Keith Syrett, and A.M. Viens, _Public Health Law: Ethics, Governance, and Regulation_, (Routledge, 2017), especially chapters 1 and 2
    o Ruth Faden and Sirine Shebaya, 'Public Health Ethics,' _The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy_ (Winter 2016 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed), available here
    o Nancy Kass, 'An Ethics Framework for Public Health,' _American Journal of Public Health_ (2001) 91:11, 1776-1782
    o James Wilson, 'Towards a Normative Framework for Public Health Ethics and Policy,' _Public Health Ethics_ (2009) 2:2, 184-194

- For collected essays and analyses in public health ethics, see:
    o Ronald Bayer, Lawrence Gostin, Bruce Jennings, and Bonnie Steinbock (eds),_Public Health Ethics—Theory, Policy, and Practice_ (Oxford University Press, 2006)
    o Angus Dawson and Marcel Verweij (eds), _Ethics, Prevention, and Public Health_ (Oxford University Press, 2007)
    o Lawrence O. Gostin and Lindsay F. Wiley (eds), _Public Health Law and Ethics: A Reader_ (3rd edn., University of California Press, 2018)

- You may also find it useful to look at papers in the following journals:
    o Shorter, more accessible pieces may be found in journals including _The BMJ_, _The Lancet_, and _Public Health_. You might, in particular, look at analysis and editorial papers.
    o For more sustained philosophical analyses, look in journals including _Bioethics_, the _Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics_, _Health Care Analysis_, the _Journal of Medical Ethics_.