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Public Health

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/puhe

Original Research

An ethical framework for evaluation of public health plans: a systematic process for legitimate and fair decision-making



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 September 2017

Received in revised form

8 June 2018

Accepted 14 July 2018

Keywords:

Public health

Health policy

Ethics/morals

Justice

Fairness

Accountability

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Given the increasing threats of communicable and non-communicable diseases, it is necessary for policy-makers and public health (PH) professionals to address ethical issues in health policies and plans. This study aimed to develop a practical framework for the ethical evaluation of PH programs.

Study design: A multidisciplinary team developed an ethical framework to evaluate PH plans from 2015 to 2017.

Methods: In this study, the multi-method approach was used. First, a list of moral norms in PH policy and practice was drafted and completed in two interactive sessions. Then, the Delphi method was used for consensus about the structural components to be adopted in the framework. After developing the framework, its efficiency was assessed by evaluating Iran's Fourth Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control.

Results: The framework was developed in the following three sections: (i) determination of the general moral norms in PH practice and policy; (ii) five steps of evaluation; and (iii) a procedural evaluation step to ensure fair decision-making. The ratio of the ethical points of the PH plan increased by 46% after implementation of the framework, and the frequency of ethical points increased significantly after applying the framework ($P = 0.001$).

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.07.018>

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Conclusion: The application of the framework for the ethical evaluation of various PH programs ensures a comprehensive and scientific-deliberative decision-making process, while also contributing to the development of the framework.

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Introduction

Public health (PH) efforts should aim to improve the social, economic, and environmental conditions in which people can live a healthy life. All activities concerning the health of populations are within the PH domain. Given the consequentialist nature of PH, its main goals are to preserve and promote the health of populations and reduce inequalities in health outcomes.¹ The characteristics of the multidisciplinary field of PH, lead to ethical issues being at the heart of the subject: it is a common good, with a preventative approach that is provided by the government.² PH is a collective effort, as its goals cannot be achieved by individual efforts; thus, it requires government action in addition to community participation.^{2,3}

Public health ethics is a sub-branch of bioethics, which help PH professionals and health-related organizations to make some necessary trade-offs so that public health goals can be realized. The objectives and activities of PH make this area unique in terms of applying and overcoming ethical principles and moral norms.⁴ The objectives of PH are related to moral norms, in particular, prevention of harm and beneficence, producing utility (optimization of benefits over harms) and justice.⁵

Some PH interventions are still a threat to other moral norms, such as individual freedom and autonomy, privacy, and confidentiality.^{5,6} With the increasing threats of communicable and non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and populations with chronic health problems, such as diabetes and obesity, it is necessary for PH professionals and other health-related institutions to address ethical conflicts in their policies and practices.⁵ Given the objectives of PH, providing universal health coverage requires informed and correct decision-making, based on empirical evidence and moral judgment. For example, the goal of ending the AIDS epidemic by 2020 is only possible if people are being informed about their illness through voluntary testing and access to health-care services. In addition, the elimination of stigma and discrimination is one of the key topics that should be addressed when planning for the prevention and control of the disease worldwide.⁷ Moreover, the socio-economic burdens of NCDs are particularly severe in developing countries, accounting for 75% of all NCD-related deaths. Thus, in order to achieve sustainable development goals, the WHO has established global governance to address complex issues that could not be managed alone. These interactions have raised a range of ethical challenges, including conflicts of interests and governance issues. Transparency, accountability, and management of conflicts of interests are ethical issues requiring

attention to prevent NCDs and chronic diseases. Therefore, policy-makers and governments have been working closely with food and drink industry partners to address a number of determinants and processes, which today are tackled by a set of institutions globally. These new challenges call for tools and methods for overcoming ethical conflicts and maximizing benefits.⁸

The American Public Health Association identified 10 essential functions for the effective implementation of PH programs,⁹ which resulted in the development of a variety of ethical frameworks. Initially, the following two concerns led to the formation of practical frameworks for ethical evaluation of PH: (i) public involvement rather than individual autonomy; and (ii) prioritization and allocation of scarce resources, especially in developing countries, which has raised the debate on justice.¹⁰ So far, several practical frameworks have been proposed for the ethical evaluation of PH programs, but none are universally approved.^{11–13} Most of these frameworks were based on common underpinning assumptions, but they were formed to address ethical issues either theoretically or practically. Kass¹¹ was the first pioneer who proposed a primary practical framework for ethical evaluation of PH, including six steps, based on two key values of social rights and social justice. Childress et al.¹⁴ conceptualized general moral considerations in PH practice and introduced six justificatory conditions to solve conflicts in the context of PH. In the stewardship model proposed by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics 2007,¹⁵ only practical recommendations for ethical decision-making were mentioned. On the other hand, given the debates raised about priority setting, especially in developing countries, ethical frameworks based on fundamental values of fairness and accountability have been proposed, which combine normative and empirical methods, and the involvement of all stakeholders and partners in policy decisions.^{16–18} Thus, to enable legitimate and fair decision-making when considering priority setting in PH policy, the 'accountability for reasonableness'¹⁹ framework was created, which was then developed by health system stakeholders in developing countries specifically for their requirements.^{20–22} Given the evolution and specialization of these frameworks, Ten Have et al.,¹² proposed a practical framework to evaluate overweight and obesity interventions, after providing an inventory of relevant moral norms. At the heart of the framework is a list of eight questions on the morally relevant features of a program, which is then followed by procedural recommendations for applying the ethical framework. Marckmann et al.,¹³ proposed an ethical framework to guide professionals in planning, conducting, and evaluating PH interventions. Their

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