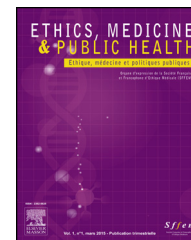Available online at

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THOUGHTS

Ethical competencies for public health personnel

Compétences éthiques pour le personnel en santé publique

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Summary   Public health cannot function without public trust, and public trust is largely dependent on the public health work force's ability to demonstrate ethical competence. Public health ethics is defined as both our moral governance — the values that motivate our work — and a decision-making framework to help guide complex ethical decisions we face in our practice. While there is no master list of values or recipe for public health ethics, there is agreement that public health ethics comprises both liberal concepts and collective concepts. At times, these liberal and collective values conflict. There are four skill domains that all public health professionals need to make ethical decisions in their practice. These domains comprise an iterative cycle, starting with the ability to identify the ethical dimensions of our work, articulate ethical dimensions and dilemmas we face in our efforts to protect the public's health, determine a path forward, especially when values and motivations conflict, and implement and evaluate the solution to allow for course corrections. Ensuring all public health professionals have minimal competence in these four skill domains will facilitate our work, build public trust, and contribute to the health of our communities.
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Résumé   La santé publique ne peut pas opérer sans la confiance du public, laquelle dépend en grande partie de la capacité du personnel de santé publique à démontrer une compétence éthique. L'éthique en santé publique est définie à la fois par notre gouvernance morale — les valeurs qui inspirent notre travail — et par un cadre décisionnel pour nous guider lorsque que

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nous faisons face à des décisions éthiques complexes dans notre pratique. Bien qu'il n'existe pas une liste exhaustive de valeurs ou une recette facile pour l'éthique en santé publique, on s'accorde à dire qu'elle comprend tant les concepts libéraux que les concepts collectifs. Parfois, ces valeurs libérales et collectives sont en conflit avec l'une l'autre. Il y a quatre domaines de compétence dont tous les professionnels de santé publique ont besoin pour prendre des décisions éthiques dans leur pratique. Ces domaines comprennent un cycle itératif qui commence avec la capacité d'identifier les dimensions éthiques de notre travail, articuler les dimensions éthiques et les dilemmes auxquels nous faisons face lorsque nous tentons de protéger la santé du public, déterminer la voie à suivre, surtout lorsque les valeurs et les motivations en question sont en conflit, et mettre en œuvre et évaluer la solution pour permettre une réorientation des démarches à suivre. S'assurer que tous les professionnels en santé publique aient une compétence minimale dans ces quatre domaines facilitera notre travail, renforcera la confiance du public et contribuera à la santé de nos communautés.
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Introduction

Since the early 2000s, when public health ethics began developing into a field in its own right, public health professionals have been reflecting on what it means to be competent in ethics. In the United States, the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH) and the accreditation body for schools and programs, the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH), have always expected public health professionals to demonstrate virtue — to be honest scientists, benevolent leaders, trustworthy stewards of public funds, and to engage the public in positive ways — but they have not proffered a consistent set of skills in ethics that all public health personnel should demonstrate. This is in part due to the confusion around the various subfields of ethics that have bearing on our work, subfields such as professional ethics, research ethics, and even clinical ethics.

In 2013 the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB), the non-profit organization that accredits state and local health departments in the United States, revised its accreditation standards to include a requirement that there be a process in place to manage ethical issues. PHAB explicitly calls for an accredited health department to have the capacity to identify and resolve ethical issues that inevitably arise in our work. The purpose of Measure 11.1.2.A is ''to assess the health department's policies and process for the identification and resolution of ethical issues that arise from the department's program, policies, interventions, or employee/employer relations'' [1].

In 2003, the Institute of Medicine, now called the National Academy of Medicine, wrote a report called, *Who will keep the public healthy? Educating public health professionals for the 21st century*. In it, they clearly stated, ''Public health needs both scholars who can articulate the unique aspects of public health ethics and public health practitioners who understand and operate within the ethical structures of the field'' [2]. In addition, the US Department of Health and Human Services recently articulated an approach to public health in the 21st century, called ''Public Health 3.0'' [3]. In the complex world of prevention, public health professionals must step out of the silos of infectious disease control, preventing chronic conditions, and building local capacity and move into a cross-sector engagement to address social determinants of health. Cross-sector engagement will require public health leaders to take on the role of ''Chief Health Strategist'' [3] backed by a workforce with essential skills in systems thinking, policy analysis, communication, entrepreneurialism, and ethics [4].

In this article, I outline a set of four basic ethics skills necessary for all public health personnel —from a state epidemiologist to a clerk at the registration desk at the local health department, from academic public health researchers to persons working in non-governmental public health organizations. Competence in these four skill domains will help public health departments and agencies achieve the minimum ethics expectations set by various accrediting bodies and demanded by our work in the 21st century. Competence in these ethics skills helps engender the public trust necessary for our work at all levels.

Public health ethics

Public health ethics is generally defined in two parts [5,6]. First, it is the moral governance for public health, or the values that motivate our work, that helps determine what ought to be done and why. Second, it is the application of a decision-making framework that helps public health personnel determine a course of action when values conflict. There are other categories or subfields of bioethics that apply to public health, which have their own literature and will not be addressed in this article. For example, if a public health professional conducts research, the field of research ethics applies, including ethics review boards and federal regulations that outline what is permitted and not permitted when conducting research with animal subjects and human participants. And all personnel are subject to the professional code of ethics for public health and, in some cases, additional professional codes of ethics in other disciplinary homes—such disciplines as medicine, nursing, engineering, law, or various social sciences. While I do not address these