



Public Health Case Studies



Introduction

Distinctive features of public health can heighten certain ethical considerations and generate ethical questions that differ from those in clinical medicine or research. The Bioethics Commission developed case studies based on its work that provide an educational opportunity to analyze scenarios similar to those that public health professionals might encounter.

I. The Bioethics Commission

The Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (Bioethics Commission) is an advisory panel composed of nationally recognized experts in medicine, science, ethics, religion, law, and engineering. The Bioethics Commission advises the President on bioethical issues arising from advances in biomedicine and related areas of science and technology, and seeks to identify and promote policies and practices that ensure scientific research, health care delivery, and technological innovation are conducted in a socially and ethically responsible manner.

The Bioethics Commission's work includes topics relevant to public health researchers and practitioners. For example, in its report [*Moral Science: Protecting Participants in Human Subjects Research*](#), the Bioethics Commission made several recommendations that are relevant to public health research. Public health research and practice often incorporate extensive community engagement, especially when they involve vulnerable or marginalized groups. The Bioethics Commission's recommendations include promoting community engagement practices that protect and allow for ethical treatment of research participants, and evaluating criteria, including the needs of the community, for ethical site selection.¹

The Bioethics Commission also addressed how to conduct pediatric medical countermeasure research ethically in light of the nation's obligation to do what it can to safeguard all children in the event of a public health emergency. In [*Safeguarding Children: Pediatric Medical Countermeasure Research*](#) the Bioethics Commission addressed how public health officials should conduct pre-event pediatric medical

¹ Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (PCSBI). (2011, December). *Moral Science: Protecting Participants in Human Subjects Research*. Washington, DC: PCSBI, pp. 78-88.



countermeasure testing that poses only a minimal level of research risk except under extraordinary circumstances.² In addition, the Bioethics Commission recommended that public health officials must be prepared to conduct post-event research when a bioterrorism attack occurs.³

In [*Ethics and Ebola: Public Health Planning and Response*](#), the Bioethics Commission addressed ethical challenges that can arise in public health emergency response. Its recommendations recognize the need for bioethics education in public health as part of broader ethics preparedness efforts for ongoing and future public health emergencies.⁴

II. Case studies

The Bioethics Commission developed the accompanying case studies, based on topics it has addressed, to provide public health professionals and others opportunities to explore ethical issues that might arise in the course of their work. These cases can be used as educational tools to teach public health professionals and students to recognize and address ethical aspects of their work and understand how deliberation can inform ethical decisions. They are appropriate for use in professional training, individual study or reflection, and traditional classroom settings.

The process of deliberation is integral to ethical decision making and involves individuals expressing differing viewpoints and offering reasons for their views to others as the larger group strives to reach consensus. Case studies are often used as a part of deliberation. The Bioethics Commission demonstrates the process of deliberation in its public meetings, which are archived at www.bioethics.gov.

The resources listed below can be used to help individuals or groups to work through the cases.

² Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (PCSBI). (2013, March). *Safeguarding Children: Pediatric Medical Countermeasure Research*. Washington, DC: PCSBI, pp. 51-56.

³ Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (PCSBI). (2013, March). *Safeguarding Children: Pediatric Medical Countermeasure Research*. Washington, DC: PCSBI, pp. 89-97.

⁴ Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (PCSBI). (2015, February). *Ethics and Ebola: Public Health Planning and Response*. Washington, DC: PCSBI, pp. 8-17.



III. Additional Resources

To learn more about ethics and public health:

Battin, M.P., et al. (2009). *The Patient as Victim and Vector: Ethics and Infectious Disease*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Callahan, D. and B. Jennings. (2002). Ethics and public health: Forging a strong relationship. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92(2), 169-176.

Dawson, A. (Ed.). (2011). *Public Health Ethics: Key Concepts and Issues in Policy and Practice*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Dawson, A. and M. Verweij (Eds.) (2007). *Ethics, Prevention, and Public Health*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Faden, R. and M. Powers. (2008). *Social Justice: The Moral Foundations of Public Health and Health Policy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Holland, S. (2015). *Public Health Ethics*. Second Edition. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Lee, L.M. (2012). Public health ethics theory: Review and path to convergence. *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 40(1), 85-98.

To learn more about public health ethics education:

Barrett, D.H. et al. Strengthening public health ethics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Journal of Public Health Management Practice*, 14(4), 348-353.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012). Good decision making in real time: Public health ethics training for local health departments. Retrieved July 7, 2015 from: <http://www.cdc.gov/od/science/integrity/phethics/trainingmaterials.htm>.

Childress, J.F. et al. Public health ethics: Mapping the terrain. *Journal of Law and Medical Ethics*, 30(2), 170-178.

Jennings, B., et al. (Eds.). (2003). *Ethics and Public Health: Model Curriculum*. Health Services and Resources Administration (HRSA), Association of Schools of Public Health, and The Hastings Center.

Kass, N.E. (2004). Public health ethics: From foundations and frameworks to justice and global public health. *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 32(2), 232-242.

Klugman, C. (2008). A tale of two fields: public health ethics. *Monash Bioethics Review*, 27(1-2), 56-64.



Lee, L.M., Wright, B. and S. Seeman. (2013). Expected ethical competencies of public health professionals and graduate curricula in accredited schools of public health in North America. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(5), 938-942.

North Carolina Institute for Public Health and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Gillings School of Global Public Health. (n.d). NCIPH Training Website. Public Health Ethics Training Series. Retrieved July 7, 2015 from <https://nciph.sph.unc.edu/tws/index.php>.

Slomka, J., et al. Professionalism and ethics in the public health. *Public Health Reports*, 123(Suppl 2), 27-35.

To learn more about case-based reasoning:

Browne, M.N. and S. M. Keeley. (2012). *Asking the right questions: A guide to critical thinking*. 10th Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Couglin, S.S., Soskolne, C.L., and K.W. Goodman. (1997). *Case Studies in Public Health Ethics*. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.

Jonsen, A. R., and S. Toulmin. (1988). *The abuse of casuistry: A history of moral reasoning*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Keefer, M. and K.D. Ashley. (2001). Case-based approaches to professional ethics: A systematic comparison of students' and ethicists' moral reasoning. *Journal of Moral Education*, 30(4), 377-397.

Kim, S. et al. (2006). A conceptual framework for developing teaching cases: a review and synthesis of the literature across disciplines. *Medical Education*, 40(9), 867-876.

Richardson, H.S. (2014, Winter). Moral Reasoning. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). Retrieved June 2, 2015 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/reasoning-moral/>.