

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS IN PUBLIC HEALTH

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Abstract: Public health ethics principles refer to the key values and beliefs arising from the distinct characteristics of public health. These principles confer people the conditions necessary for a healthy living, providing „a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being not merely the absence of a disease or infirmity”.(World Health Organization)

Cuvinte cheie: etică,
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Rezumat: Principiile de etică în sănătatea publică se referă la valorile și credințele cheie care decurg din caracteristicile sănătății publice. Aceste principii oferă oamenilor condițiile necesare unui trai sănătos, „asigurând o stare completă de bine din punct de vedere psihic, mental, fizic și social, nu numai absența bolii.”(Organizația Mondială a Sănătății)

Ethics is a set of rules of conduct shared by a particular community, rules that are based on the distinction between good and evil. Ethics is a theory of morality. An ethical approach means to reflect on the general principles (including on what basis we choose a set of principles in relation to others) and to judge in light of these principles what a particular person including ourselves, should do in a particular situation.

The role of ethics is to help people and institutions to decide what is best to do, what criteria to choose and what the moral reasons for their actions are.

At international level, twelve basic principles on ethics in public health are recognized. These were included in the public health code of ethics developed by the centres for Disease Control and Prevention and by the Public Health Leadership Society.(1)

This code is not exhaustive and does not bring any news regarding ethics in public health. It is a code that highlights the key values and beliefs resulting from the distinctive features of public health. One of the most important issues highlighted in this code is the interdependence of people. This interdependence is the essence of any community. The aim of public health is not only to ensure and promote the health of communities, but also to recognize that the health of individuals is closely related to their communities.

This code is mainly addressed to the public and to the institutions aiming at ensuring and promoting public health, but also to those who recognize the effects of their work on their communities.

At the basis of drafting the principles of the code of ethics in public health lie a series of values and beliefs. Among the most important are those related to:

1. Health

People are entitled to health resources. According to Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2) “everyone has the right to a standard adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.”

2. Community

People are inherently social and interdependent.

Each of us seek the company of others, we rely on each other to feel safe and to survive. The positive relations between people and the positive collaboration between institutions represent the basis of a healthy community. There should be always concern for the others, because the actions we take affect the life of those around us.

3. Institutions

The effectiveness of institutions depends largely on the public’s trust. The factors that contribute to building the trust include the following actions taken by institutions: communication, transparency, justice, reciprocity.

4. Collaboration

Collaboration is a key element in public health. Public health infrastructure consists of a wide range of disciplines and sectors that in order to be effective, they should work together.

5. Physical environment

Men and the environment in which they live are two interrelated elements. People depend on the environmental resources where they live. Any imbalance in our natural and physical environment can adversely affect peoples’ health. But, it is also true that people can have a profound effect on the physical environment, too.

6. Opportunity to discourse

Everyone should have the opportunity to contribute to the elaboration and development of public health policies. It is important to seek information from those directly involved and affected by implementing programmes and policies to protect and promote health. The main ethical dilemma of public health is the balance between the individual freedom and the responsibility of the government to provide citizens with a certain degree of health protection.(3)

7. Public health institutions

The way in which society is structured is reflected in the health system of the respective community. It is important to identify and promote the basic requirements for the health of the community.

8. Experience

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To know means to have power. We need to improve our knowledge about health, as well as the means to protect it by sustained research and by the accumulation of knowledge and experience.

Once these accomplished, it is a moral obligation to share all this knowledge to others. For example, an active and informed participation in the elaboration of different public health policies requires access to information.

9. Science

The scientific methods, through the variety of scientific tools, both qualitative and quantitative, provide relatively objective means of identifying the factors necessary to ensure the health of a population.

10. Confidentiality

People must act on what they know. Public health institutions should ensure the confidentiality of information they have and not to disclose such information that could negatively influence the individual or community, except as provided by law.

11. Values

In many cases it is necessary to act without having all the information we need. In other cases, for example in policy development, the value and human dignity are taken into account, and not the optimal efficiency or the financial benefits. In such cases, values are at the basis of implementing the actions.

Based on these values, we can say that the mandate to provide and protect health is inherently moral. Until recently, the ethical nature of public health was implicitly assumed. Over time, society has imposed an explicit attention in terms of ethics. This has occurred with the development of new advanced technologies which also brought about new dilemmas regarding ethics, as well as the development of a pluralistic society in which we cannot take for granted the values of one culture or religion, but we must tailor ourselves a set of values and beliefs in the midst of such diversity.

Historically speaking, medical institutions have been more explicit about the ethical elements of the medical practice than were the public health institutions.

Public health attention is not fully consonant with those of medicine in general. Thus, medical ethical principles cannot be transferred to public health, as public health is concerned more with populations than with individuals, more with prevention than with treatment. Therefore, it was considered imperative to create a strict code of ethics adapted to public health.

Such a code of ethics in public health clarifies the distinctive elements of public health and the ethical principles according to which these elements are built. The code of ethics guides the institutions and professionals in public health in their approach regarding health assurance and promotion.

Below, I will present the twelve principles that formed the basis for the elaboration of a code of ethics in public health by the Public Health Leadership Society in the United States of America.(1)

This code of ethics has been presented to a large number of international institutions for adoption or endorsement.

Ethical principles in public health:

1. Public health should address principally the fundamental causes of disease and the requirements related to health status in order to prevent the adverse effects on health.
2. Public health should provide the health of a community by observing the individuals' rights of that particular community.

3. Public health programmes, policies and priority axes should be elaborated and assessed by processes that should give the members of the community the opportunity to bring new and useful information.
4. Public health should support and work in the benefit of all community members, including those deprived of civil rights, in providing the necessary health conditions and resources.
5. Public health should aim at obtaining information needed to implement effective policies and programmes in order to protect and promote health.
6. Public health institutions should provide communities with the information they need to take decisions regarding the elaboration of health policies and programmes and to obtain the community's consent for their implementation.
7. Public health institutions should act in a timely manner based on the information they have, resources and the mandate given by the community.
8. Public health programmes and policies should include a variety of approaches that anticipate and respect the different values, beliefs, cultures at community level.
9. Public health programmes and policies should be implemented so as to improve the physical and social environment of the community.
10. Public health institutions should protect confidentiality of information that, if published, may harm the individual or the community, except as provided by law.
11. Public health institutions should ensure the professional competence of the employees.
12. Public health institutions must engage in collaborative actions and affiliations with a view to build the public trust and the institutional efficiency.

Reviewing these general principles may represent a basis for discussion regarding the standardization and adoption of a code of ethics in public health at the level of public health institutions in Romania.

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