

Introduction to Public Health Ethics 2: Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations

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In this second¹ of three briefing notes² on public health ethics, we provide an overview of various philosophical and theoretical perspectives that have informed the development, evolution, and application of public health ethics throughout its short history. We believe it is important for public health practitioners to understand these ideas because they inform, either explicitly or implicitly, ethical decision making in public health practice. They also provide a foundation for the public health ethics frameworks that are presented and discussed in our third briefing note.³

We know that public health has long been tied to utilitarianism, harkening back to Edwin Chadwick, the founder of the early movement in Britain, who was influenced by Bentham's utilitarianism (Nixon et al., 2005). From a utilitarian perspective, public health activities are generally teleological or end-oriented and consequentialist (Childress et al., 2002) with health outcomes the consequence of greatest concern. Quantitative models for priority setting that include measures of health status like quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) and disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), and methods such as cost-effectiveness analysis and cost-benefit analysis, are grounded firmly in utilitarianism. Although the ethical issues associated with these have been widely debated⁴ (e.g., Anand & Hanson, 2004; Brock, 2004, 2007; Kamm, 2004), these quantitative approaches have had a lot of appeal in the epidemiologically oriented fields of public health and policy analysis. Work in the ethics of communicable disease control and pandemic planning has been reflective of utilitarian concerns, at least in Canada (Baylis, Kenny, & Sherwin, 2008; Upshur et al., 2005).

Contractarianism and rights-based theories have also provided philosophical justification for public

health actions, drawing on the work of John Rawls, grounded in the notions of freedom and equal moral worth of individuals and concerned about fundamental human, social, and political rights (Jennings, 2003). Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971) is concerned with the rights of the least well off, and thus is congruent with public health considerations for the most disadvantaged in society. This perspective, however, has been criticized for the individualism inherent in its distributive justice focus, which is not adequately reflective of population health. It focuses on the distribution of material goods and does not account for non-material concerns such as access to decision making and power (Pauly, 2008; Powers & Faden, 2006; Rogers, 2006; Young, 1990).

Concerns with liberal individualism in contractarian ethics and a belief in the limited conception of both human relationships and justice in utilitarianism have led to communitarian formulations of the philosophical foundations for public health ethics (Jennings, 2003). Communitarianism is a more recent philosophical perspective put forward as a foundation for public health ethics but is perhaps less well known and understood given the greater emphasis on utilitarian and contractarian perspectives in health care ethics more broadly. Thus, we provide a more extensive discussion of communitarian perspectives and the rationale for the more recent trend to invoking communitarian concepts as guidance in public health decision making. Communitarians and some prominent public health ethicists argue that these concepts are more congruent with the values base of public health. In fact, Bayer, Gostin, Jennings, and Steinbock (2007) argue that public health is "a species of communitarianism" (p. 20).

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² To read the first document of the series, see MacDonald (2014).

³ See MacDonald (2015).

⁴ For more information on this subject, see Rozworski & Bellefleur (2013) and Rozworski (2014).



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