

ETHICS

In Public Health Practice & Research

Professor Lee Hin Peng

The role of ethics in the practice of medicine and public health is not new. What we're experiencing now is a [renewed consciousness](#) of the need for ethical considerations in what we do, and together with this, a certain degree of systemization.

Ethics is about [setting moral standards or codes of human conduct](#) that distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. In practice, we have to seek a balance between what is considered acceptable and what unacceptable. This is something we are very familiar with in public health.

Public health and medicine involve close human interactions, which invariably include an ethical dimension. As public health practitioners, we go one step further in our [dual obligations to the individual subject and the community at large](#). We seek to protect and improve the health of populations, while respecting individual autonomy. However, even this basic tenet of public health may be challenged in certain contexts. For example, many countries have compulsory immunization requirements. Clearly, these requirements curtail individual rights, but also protect the community as unvaccinated children and adults pose a risk to the population.

Because there is much more human contact, [population-based practice](#) is quite different from lab-based work. It is also different from clinical work because much of public health work also includes contact with apparently healthy subjects who must be protected against physical, psychological and social harm. Finally, unlike clinical work, public health policy and subsequent actions are often undertaken by government agencies, at the population level.

Those working in government ministries or departments can see the close interaction between public health practice and politics. Balancing expectations of and demands made, on our services and appropriate responses to political pressures are important considerations. The [application of justice in the fair distribution of health resources](#) is always a matter of concern.

In this 'toolkit', we have included a sample of resources that can inform the way we make decisions in our practice of public health. [Public health ethics is a fast evolving field of ideals, principles and practices](#). As such, we must endeavor to keep abreast and ensure that we are seen to do the proper thing - evidence-based practice within the social milieu of our communities.

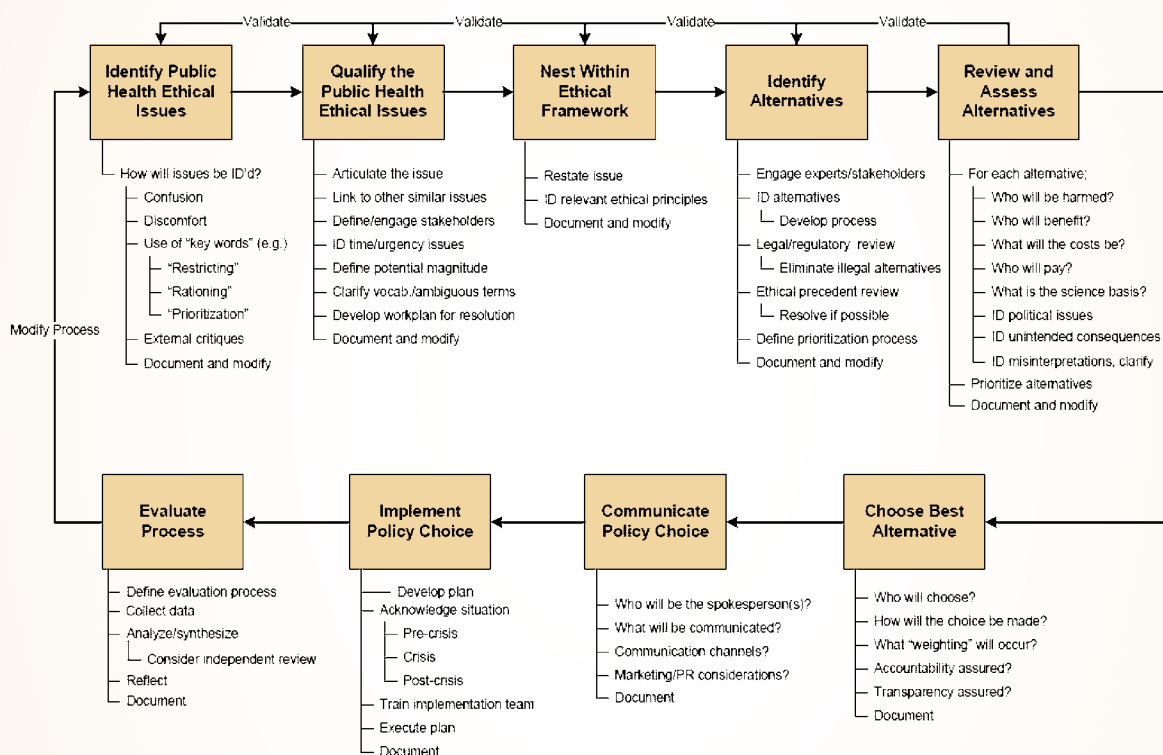


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Checklist for Public Health Ethical Decision-Making		
Identify	✓	Recognize and identify ethical questions, issues and problems
Clarify	✓	Establish key facts, agree upon important decisions, and gather other necessary information
	✓	Clearly articulate the issues
	✓	Identify stakeholders
Analyze	✓	Review ethical principles, standard of practice and relevant law to the ethical issues of the case
	✓	Frame various perspectives and underlying values
	✓	List alternate courses of action
Act	✓	Formulate recommendations
	✓	Communicate to stakeholders
Evaluate	✓	Evaluate action or outcome

(Adapted from, *Strengthening Public Health Ethics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Drue H. Barrett, Roger H. Bernier, and Anne L. Sowell. *J Public Health Management Practice*, 2008, 14(4), 348–353))

Steps in Public Health Ethical Decision-Making



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Resources on Ethical Decision-Making for Public Health Practitioners	
Book	Public Health Ethics: Theory, Policy, and Practice Editors: Ronald Bayer, Lawrence O. Gostin, Bruce Jennings, and Bonnie Steinbock Published by Oxford University Press, NY, 2006.
Discussion Paper	Public Health Ethics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - Ensuring Health, Improving Trust (The What, Why, and How of Public Health Ethics at CDC) Prepared by the CDC Public Health Ethics Committee (PHEC), 2007
Journal	Public Health Ethics; Editors: Angus Dawson and Marcel Verweij Published by Oxford University Press.
Papers	1) Politics and public health ethics in practice: right and left meet right and wrong Gollust SE, Baum NM, Jacobson PD. (J Public Health Manag Pract 2008; 14:340-7.) 2) Looking ahead: addressing ethical challenges in public health practice Baum NM, Gollust SE, Goold SD, Jacobson PD. (J Law Med Ethics 2007; 35:657-67.) 3) Ethics of Population-Based Research Holly A. Taylor and Summer Johnson (J Law Med Ethics 2007; 35: 295-9)