Beyond Bioethics: Thinking about Ethics in Public Health

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What makes public health different?

- The common good vs. individual rights
- Group benefit vs. individual interests
- Public vs. private
- Obligations vs. rights
- Macro vs. micro
- Power of the collective
“Common good” perspective

- Common good decisions are informed by utilitarian analyses and justifications
  - eg, public policy
  - Greatest good for the greatest number
    - What counts as good and how do we measure it?
    - Does it matter which people benefit?
    - Adding justice to utilitarian thinking

- Compared to rights language
  - Positive vs. negative rights (liberties)
    - Correlative duties/obligations
“We’re running a little behind, so I’d like each of you to ask yourself, ‘Am I really that sick, or would I just be wasting the doctor’s valuable time?’”
Some basic principles of bioethics

A short history

- Medical ethics goes back to earliest days of medicine
- “Modern” bioethics began in the late 1960s
  - Informed by challenges in health care rather than public health
    - End of life (Quinlan)
    - Allocation of scarce resources (Seattle dialysis) vs. access to health care
    - Research ethics scandals
      » Tuskegee, Willowbrook, others
Some basic principles of bioethics

- Beginning of principle-based approach
  - Respect for persons (autonomy)
  - Non-maleficence (prevent harm)
  - Beneficence (do good)
  - Justice

- Works better in health care and research ethics settings; less appropriate for public health
  - Why?
    - Driven by seeming trumping nature of autonomy
“Well, actually, they are written in stone.”
Beyond bioethics—Ethics and public health

- General moral considerations in public health
  - Produce benefits, prevent harms, maximize utility

- Other general moral considerations
  - Liberty, justice

- When PH decisions create conflicts among general moral considerations, need justification to override one in favor of another
  - Effectiveness, proportionality, necessity, least infringement, public justification

- Example—mandatory smallpox vaccination
What students should know

- Ethics and public health is where the action is—and is part of bioethics
  - Public health (policy) encompasses a wide range of ethical issues
    - From access to health care, to stem cell research
    - Bioterrorism, state powers
    - Infectious disease
      - Flu to smallpox
      - Popular press, media
    - Professional issues
      - Vaccination of health professionals
      - Public communication of health messages
        » Breast cancer and abortion in Minnesota
“And it was so typically brilliant of you to have invited an epidemiologist.”
Teaching ethics and public health

- Ethics courses
  - Required and elective
  - Ethics concentrations

- Integrating ethics in coursework

- Resources
  - ASPH curriculum
    - History
    - Academic and practice community input
    - Modules and complete curriculum
  - Codes of ethics--PHLS