

Ethical Principles in Priority-Setting for Vaccines in Times of Shortage

Seattle

Ethical Issues Related to
Vaccination of Children



Daniel Wikler, Ph.D.
Harvard School of Public Health

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Two central ethical issues in a time of shortage

- Powers of the state vs liberties of citizens
 - Requires *trust*:
 - In the truth of government claims
 - In the competence of government authorities
 - That the state and the public share values
 - In the motivation of government to act in the public interest
- Distribution of vaccines
 - Must be viewed as *fair*
 - Priorities based on shared values
 - No favoritism, patronage, or self-dealing

Trust and Fairness Closely linked

- Public trust of government authority in a time of infectious disease may be undermined by a perception that priorities in protection and rescue are unfair
- Public authority may be needed for orderly execution of priority-setting plans

What basis for priority-setting?

Goals:

- Good outcomes (life, health)
- Maintenance of civil and political order
- Maintenance of critical infrastructure
- Reduce impact on normal activities and pursuits (personal, public, commercial)

Value dilemma: 50 Pills

You are chief of a ward with 100 patients.
50 of these patients need 2 pills to survive. One pill does not help them.
50 of these patients need 1 pill to survive.
You have 50 pills. You can't get more.
Who should get the pills? On what basis should they be chosen?

Value dilemma: Protecting the vulnerable

You are chief of a ward with 100 patients. Some are at risk of dying unless they receive one pill.

- 50 patients have a 1 in 2 chance of dying.
- 50 patients have a 1 in 4 chance of dying.

You have 50 pills. Who should get them? On what basis should they be chosen?

Value dilemma: universality

In a town of 100,000, the public health department has \$100,000 for colon cancer screening. There are two tests:

Test A costs \$1. If administered to everyone, 100 lives will be saved.

Test B costs \$2. Administration to half the population, chosen randomly, would save 110 lives

Which test should the town choose?

Value dilemma: Protection from harm vs causing harm

1. Five children are playing on a trolley track as the trolley approaches. If the trolley is diverted to a spur, their lives will be saved; but one child is playing on the spur. The driver has a heart attack. You would be able to divert the trolley. Should you do so?
2. You are a surgeon with five patients who need 5 organs. You could carve up one healthy patient and save all 5. Should you?

Value dilemma: Winners and losers

The public health department of a large city has a limited budget for hypertension screening. The highest incidence of hypertension in the city occurs in inner-city African-American men. Because most cannot afford antihypertensive drugs or continuing medical care, targeting this group will save only 50 lives. 200 lives would be saved by targeting suburban males, mostly white and well-to-do. The life expectancy of the suburban males is 8 years longer than that of the inner-city males.

Which group should be targeted?

Value dilemma: Unequal access to enhance access

You are chief of a liver transplant service that chooses recipients by a point system based on urgency, likely outcome, and time on the waiting list. Joe Smith, a disabled former letter carrier, had been selected as the next recipient. But Fred Megabucks, a billionaire, whose liver was destroyed when he ingested a poisonous mushroom in an organic restaurant, offers a donation that will enable 10 more liver transplants to occur each year. The man who is given the liver will live; the other will die.

Who should be given the liver?

Value Dilemma: Non-health benefits

Your community faces an epidemic. A vaccine in short supply offers protection. Vaccines will be targeted to the most vulnerable with the exception of health workers and “critical infrastructure” workers, who are assured vaccines.

The Chamber of Commerce proposes that executives whose work generates \$1 million or more per year to the local economy should also be given vaccines.

Should their proposal be accepted?