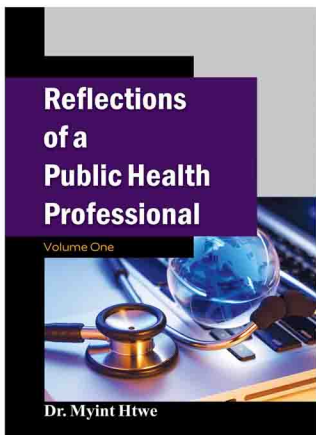


# Rational Decision Making in Public Health



**Dr Myint Htwe**

## 11. Rational decision making in public health

Public health professionals, project managers and policy makers of the Ministry of Health (MoH) have been taking decisions on several issues related to public health in terms of selection of various programmes, special projects, strategies, interventions, resource allocation, production of human resource for public health, management of disease outbreaks, strengthening of rural health centres and sub-centres, identification of public health research agenda, retention of health personnel in rural and remote areas, prioritization on many issues in public health, etc.

Application of some of the public health principles can facilitate in taking rational and balanced decisions. It can also lead to fruition of overall objectives of MoH which were set as:

- (i) *To enable every citizen to attain full life expectancy and enjoy longevity of life; and*
- (ii) *To ensure that every citizen is free from diseases.*

However, in addition to public health principles, public health professionals must be well versed with principles of public health ethics for facilitating the decision-making process. Because, *decision making in public health involves the application of two principles, i.e., (i) principles of public health; and (ii) principles of public health ethics.*

Public health ethics is a relatively new field of study, emerging a couple of decades ago, arising out of dissatisfaction with the traditional orientation of biomedical ethics.<sup>3</sup> It was also fueled by bioterrorism and infectious disease threats due to 9/11 and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).<sup>9</sup> In the field of ethics, we have generally four major areas:

- (i) *Bioethics (the study of ethical issues brought about by advances in biology and medicine);*

- (ii) *Clinical ethics (analysis of ethical issues and dilemmas in clinical practice);*
- (iii) *Research ethics (protection of research subjects in compliance with ethical principles laid down in Belmont report, Declaration of Helsinki and many WHO CIOMS guidelines); and*
- (iv) *Public health ethics (practical decision making that supports public health policy and mandate).<sup>6</sup>*

Medical and research ethics give more attention to individual autonomy whereas public health ethics focuses on a group of people or community. Three main ethical principles of research ethics are enshrined in Belmont principles:

- (i) *Respect for persons (autonomy and protection of those with diminished autonomy);*
- (ii) *Beneficence and nonmaleficence (do no harm and maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms); and*
- (iii) *Justice (giving persons what they deserve and fair distribution of burdens and benefits) are also considered as part of public health ethics but are balanced against other considerations that are unique to public health.<sup>6</sup>*

In essence, public health ethics can be seen as principles and norms for guiding the practice of public health and as a process of identifying, analyzing and resolving ethical issues in public health.<sup>6</sup>

Public health ethics is complex and evolving. The public health team generally comprises general public health professionals, epidemiologists, social scientists, health economists, sociologists, etc. General public health professionals place emphasis on policy and strategic perspectives, epidemiologists on evidence, health economists on utility, environmentalists on future generations, and sociologists on social justice. Public health ethics centres on government (health institutions), population (communities with

## *Reflections of a Public Health Professional*

different characteristics) and individuals (with different background experiences) and managing these three groups in the context of public health ethics needs a certain amount of skill and must be handled very carefully. Public health professionals must, therefore, consider beyond the abstract and must be grounded in the real world. Otherwise, there will be unnecessary ethical tensions in taking decisions related to public health.

When public health activities are implemented, some individual liberties or autonomy may be lost. Therefore, *a framework of ethical analysis in public health is necessary to guide public health professionals for ethical decision making.*<sup>8</sup> Public health ethics focuses on public health issues related to populations, institutions, communities, and geographical areas. Many of us are familiar with bioethics, clinical ethics, and research ethics. In fact, we are practicing public health ethics to some extent in our decision-making process on several public health issues. However, *many public health professionals are not very familiar with the application of principles of public health ethics* in their decision-making process during the course of their work.

Simply put, *public health ethics is the application of relevant ethical principles and moral values to public health such as in justifying public health programmes and public health policy formulation, and selection of public health interventions from among various possible alternative courses of action.* Decision making in public health is not solely dependent on technical perspectives but also on certain distinctive characteristics of public health. One important fact in public health is interdependence of people and events. It means that health status of the individual is closely linked to the health of the population. Therefore, consideration of ethical perspectives on public health issues is equally important and should be part and parcel of the decision-making process.

National health policymakers also need to consider ethical principles not only in formulating but also in implementing health policies in their specific national context, customs, and cultures.<sup>5</sup> When public health ethics is applied, one must look beyond public health and also see how social and economic

determinants are affecting public health. It is crucial that ethical principles and values underlying decision making in resource allocation of public health projects and programmes must be clearly stated and documented. The rationale given by the government on decision-making in public health will depend on the overall policy of the government, national health policy, socioeconomic situation of the country and may be different from that of international agencies, foundations, nongovernmental organizations and professional associations.

*Decision making in the public health domain should not be done by one person.* By the very nature of public health, decision making in public health must be done collectively taking into consideration relevant ethical principles and moral values together with long-term and short-term implications on the recipient population. There are several examples by which public health ethics is considered in managing a public health issue, management of outbreaks and disasters, public health policy making and public health intervention selection. Several criteria are used in dealing with a scenario to achieve what we call practicing good public health ethics.

Professionals in the field of ethics have proposed several ethical frameworks on public health. The *six-step ethics framework proposed by Nancy E Kass* seems to be applicable in most situations. The framework will guide public health professionals regarding ethical implications of proposed public health policies, programmes, projects, strategies, interventions and initiatives. Taking into consideration the six-step ethics framework<sup>8</sup>, public health professionals should further explore along the following lines.

- (i) *What are public health goals of proposed programmes/projects, and interventions? Are they in line with the national health policy and plans? Are they targeting the real need of the specific population groups or community?*
- (ii) *How effective are programmes/projects, and interventions in achieving the stated goals? Are there other programmes/projects and interventions*

## *Reflections of a Public Health Professional*

*more effective and efficient than the proposed ones? Will recipient population groups be treated equally or receive the benefits equally?*

- (iii) What are the known or potential burdens of programmes/projects and interventions on the community?*
- (iv) Could these burdens be minimized? Are there alternative approaches?*
- (v) Are programmes/projects and interventions implemented fairly?*
- (vi) How can benefits and burdens of programmes/projects and interventions be fairly balanced?*

Another example is *ethical issues in pandemic planning*<sup>4</sup>, which can be applied in a generic manner to contain most pandemic or epidemic communicable diseases. Ethical issues are related to health risk assessment, resource allocation, hospital management decisions including rationing of antivirals, allocation of hospital beds and vaccinations, identifying occupational risk levels and staff duties and roster, inclusive planning and decision making, etc. We must take all these into account based on a clear ethical framework so that all those involved in management of a pandemic will have a fair share of responsibilities. To facilitate discussion of a scenario, the following set of management principles could be applied, i.e.,

- (i) Act on the best available evidence or information;*
- (ii) Ensure transparency in decision making;*
- (iii) Maintain transparent and regular communications;*
- (iv) Be sensitive to cultural requirements;*
- (v) Practice inclusive decision making on equal footing;*
- (vi) Be accountable and responsible; and*
- (vii) Responsiveness in the decision-making process*<sup>4</sup>.

Five general ethical considerations that could be applied in developing a public health response to any pandemic are<sup>14</sup>:

- (i) *There must be a balance among rights, interests, and values;*
- (ii) *Use best available evidence but remain flexible and unbiased;*
- (iii) *Seek transparency, public engagement, and social mobilization;*
- (iv) *Inform, educate and communicate; and*
- (v) *Justify resource constraints and justifications.*

Ethical consideration in preparedness planning for pandemic influenza made by the University of Toronto Joint Centre for Bioethics, Pandemic Working Group was an excellent example for public health professionals to follow. It can be applied in several similar instances.

The full set of ethical analysis framework, as proposed by Garre-Bernheim R, et al., encompasses three sections:

- (i) *Analyze the ethical issues in the situation;*
- (ii) *Evaluate ethical dimensions of alternate course of public health actions (utility, justice, respect for individual interests and social value, respect for legitimate public institutions); and*
- (iii) *Provide justification for a particular public health action (effectiveness, proportionality, necessity, least infringement, public justification).<sup>12</sup>*

In the United States, the Centre for Health Leadership and Practice, Public Health Institute, had initiated the development of Principles of Ethical Practice of Public Health with involvement of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Public Health Leadership Society (PHLS), American Public Health Association (APHA), and public health academia and ethicists. The 12 ethical principles were written with the American public health system in mind. It was formally adopted by APHA Executive Board in February 2002.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the codes were directed towards institutions and were based on several ethical concepts such as human rights, distributive justice, beneficence, interdependence between humans versus autonomy, confidentiality versus information sharing, etc. (<http://www.apha.org/codeofethics>). Many of the

## *Reflections of a Public Health Professional*

statements can be applied in situations observed in developing countries. It is desirable that we should have such a code of practice or ethical principles in public health in Myanmar's context. The code could not be static because the world is changing and so are new ethical challenges in public health are emerging.

The *principles of ethical practice of public health in a pandemic situation* were based on the following values and beliefs, which are applicable in developing countries also.<sup>13</sup> These are:

- (i) Humans have a right to the resources necessary for health;*
- (ii) Humans are inherently social and interdependent;*
- (iii) The effectiveness of institutions depends heavily on the public's trust;*
- (iv) Collaboration is the key element in public health;*
- (v) People and their physical environment are interdependent;*
- (vi) Each person in a community should have an opportunity to contribute to public discourse;*
- (vii) Identifying and promoting fundamental requirements for health in a community are of primary concern to public health;*
- (viii) Knowledge is important and powerful;*
- (ix) Science is the basis for much of our public health knowledge;*
- (x) People are responsible for acting on the basis of what they know; and*
- (xi) The action is not based on information alone.*

Public health professionals should consider the following 12 Principles of Ethical Practice of Public Health<sup>13</sup> before taking decisions on any public health issue.

- (i) Public health should address principally fundamental causes of disease and requirements for health, aiming to prevent adverse health outcomes;*
- (ii) Public health should achieve community health in a way that respects the rights of individuals in the community;*



- (iii) *Public health policies, programmes, and priorities should be developed and evaluated through processes that ensure an opportunity for input from community members;*
- (iv) *Public health should advocate and work for empowerment of disenfranchised community members, aiming to ensure that the basic resources and conditions necessary for health are accessible to all;*
- (v) *Public health should seek information needed to implement effective policies and programmes that protect and promote health;*
- (vi) *Public health institutions should provide communities with the information they have that is needed for decisions on policies and programmes and should obtain the community's consent for their implementation;*
- (vii) *Public health institutions should act in a timely manner on the information they have, with the resources and the mandate given to them by the public;*
- (viii) *Public health policies and programmes should incorporate a variety of approaches that anticipate and respect diverse values, beliefs, and cultures in the community;*
- (ix) *Public health programmes and policies should be implemented in a manner that most enhances the physical and social environment;*
- (x) *Public health institutions should protect the confidentiality of information that can bring harm to an individual or community if made public; (Exceptions must be justified on the basis of high likelihood of significant harm to individuals or others).*
- (xi) *Public health institutions should ensure professional competence of their employees; and*
- (xii) *Public health institutions and their employees should engage in collaborations and affiliations in ways that build the public's trust and institution's effectiveness.*

## *Reflections of a Public Health Professional*

We cannot simply apply the principles of medical ethics to public health, which deals with large groups of the population rather than with an individual person or patient. It is to be noted that public health laws and public health ethics are complementary because public health laws may be a useful starting point for consideration of public health action.<sup>6</sup>

### **Conclusion**

If we apply principles of public health ethics in public health practice, we can:

- (i) *Rationally prioritize and justifiably conduct appropriate public health interventions;*
- (ii) *Have greater transparency in public health decision making to earn public trust and confidence and thus collaboration with the communities can be easily achieved; and*
- (iii) *Augment scientific integrity and professional competency in the field of public health.*<sup>6</sup>

All these factors will greatly facilitate achieving the objectives of MoH in addition to successfully implementing the strategic directions of national health policy. We should, therefore, apply principles of public health ethics as one of the important tools for decision making in public health.

### **References**

1. Carl H Coleman, Marie-Charlotte Bouesseau, Andreas Reis, *The Contribution of Ethics to Public Health*, Bulletin of World Health Organization, August 2008, 86 (8)
2. *Public Health Ethics*, CDC, Atlanta, GA, USA (PHEthics@cdc.com)
3. Public Health Ethics - Selected Resources: *Ethics in Pandemic*, National Collaborating Center for Healthy Public Policy, Quebec, May 2010 (www.ncchpp.ca)

4. Torda, A. (2006). *Ethical Issues in Pandemic Planning*. Medical Journal of Australia, 185(10 Suppl.) S73-S76
5. Carl H Coleman, Marie-Charlotte Bouesseau, Andreas Reis, Alexander M Capron, *How should Ethics be Incorporated into Public Health Policy and Practice?* Bulletin of World Health Organization, July 2007, 85 (7)
6. *Good Decision Making in Real Time: Public Health Ethics Training for Local Health Departments*. Facilitator's Manual, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Department of Health and Human Services. August 1, 2012.
7. James C Thomas, Michael Sage, V James Guillory, *A Code of Ethics for Public Health*, Am J Public Health. 2002 July; 92 (7): 1057-1057
8. Nancy E Kass, *An Ethics Framework for Public Health*. Am J of Public Health, 2001 November, 91 (11)
9. Bernheim, RG. *Public Health Ethics: The Voice of Practitioners*. Special Supplement to Volume 31, Number 4: *The Public's Health and the Law in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics.
10. Childress, JF, Faden RR, Garre RD et al. *Public Health Ethics: Mapping the Terrain*. J Law Med Ethics. 2002; 30: 170-178
11. Gaare-Bernheim R, Neiburg P, Bonnie R. *Ethics and the Practice of Public Health*. Goodman R, et al (eds). Law in Public Health Practice. Oxford University Press, 2002, 2007
12. *Principles of Ethical Practice of Public Health*, version 2.2, Public Health Leadership Society, 2002
13. *Ethical considerations in Developing a Public Health Response to Pandemic Influenza*, World Health Organization, 2007.

(NB. This is the updated version of the article, which appeared in the Bulletin of Preventive and Social Medicine Society, Volume 1, Number 2, January 2015.)