

Public Health Ethics: Theory, Policy, and Practice

A review by Jason Lesandrini

Editors: Ronald Bayer, Lawrence O. Gostin, Bruce Jennings, Bonnie Steinbock
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Public health ethics has come to forefront of many social debates given the worldwide encounters with pandemic diseases, especially severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Canada and the possibility of a worldwide avian flu outbreak. These (possible) outbreaks have forced individuals, public health workers and governments to consider the ethical components of the practice of public health. The editors of *Public Health Ethics: Theory, Policy and Practices* tackle this broad issue in their anthology, extracting essays from various disciplines—philosophy, medicine, law, and public health.

The collected works are divided into six parts spanning a broad array of controversial topics, e.g., the use of genetic information in public health programs. The introductions to each part of the book are particularly unique in that they give the reader a historical context to view the internal debates. For example, in the section on infectious diseases the authors describe how screening procedures for tuberculosis arose out of the development of germ theory in the nineteenth century.

Although the essays mainly discuss public health ethics in the context of the United States, the extension to others countries is easily accomplished given the clarity and concision of the selected essays. In addition, the essays provided give the reader an excellent understanding of the basic ideas in public health ethics, which enables them to extend the arguments to other issues.

A particular strength of this text is its readability. Frequently essays within public health deal with complicated and confusing empirical data that are nearly incomprehensible to the novice reader. The editors have eluded this problem by wisely selecting essays that clearly explain what the data presented mean and thus help the untrained reader comprehend the issues.

The only weakness of the text is that the introductions to each section are at times too short to explain all that is necessary for understanding the arguments presented. For example, in the introduction to the section on Justice and Health it would have been nice to see a brief exposition on competing theories of justice in order to explain to the reader the continuing debate on what justice require. To merely claim that justice require requires fairness doesn't tell the reader much about what actually is fair. Although the editors should have included more about what counts as fairness, the lack of information is understandable given the limits on space.

This text fills an important gap in the literature by providing those unacquainted with the field of public health ethics a great glimpse into the discipline. Although there are substantial holes in the topics covered in the book, the editors cannot be faulted because of the exhaustive literature on issues in public health. Overall, this is an excellent text for anyone wanting a general overview of public health ethics and is most appropriate for intro level students.