

# ETHICS IN DISASTERS



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Source: WHO/AMRO/Victor Ariscain

# Introduction

- Ethics is about right and wrong in human conduct.
- Ethics is about choices, dilemmas and grey areas.
- The accepted principles or moral codes that are applied to the practice of a specific profession  
→ **professional ethics**
- Behavior that conforms to the accepted standards of that profession → **ethical behavior**
- **Disaster ethics** are concerned with all issues related to moral decision-making and actions taken within the context of disasters.

# Ethical principles

- **Substantive ethical principles** : considerations to explain why a particular policy or course of action is ethically justified.
- **Procedural ethical principles** : the way in which decisions or actions should be made if they are to be considered ethically justified.
- Both kinds of ethical principle are relevant for deciding how to **triage people during an emergency**

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# Ten substantive ethical values

## 1. Individual liberty

- In an emergency, restrictions to individual liberty may be necessary to protect the public from serious harm.
- Should be proportional, necessary, relevant, be the least restrictive possible and be applied equitably.

## 2. Protection of the public from harm

- Health care organizations and public health authorities may be required to take actions that impinge on individual liberty.
- Decision-makers should weigh the imperative for compliance, provide reasons for public health measures to encourage compliance and establish mechanisms to review decisions.

### **3. Proportionality**

The action (1 and 2) should not exceed those necessary to address the actual level of risk to or critical needs of the community.

### **4. Privacy:**

In an emergency, it may be necessary to override the individual right (to privacy in health care) in order to protect the public from serious harm.

### **5. Duty to provide care:**

Inherent to all codes of ethics for health care professionals is the duty to provide care and to respond to suffering. Health care providers will have to weigh the demands of their professional roles against other competing obligations to their own health and to families and friends.

## 6. Reciprocity:

- The society support those who face a disproportionate burden in protecting the public good and take steps to minimize the burden as much as possible.
- Measures to protect the public good are likely to impose a disproportionate burden on health care workers, patients and their families.

## 7. Equity:

- Under normal conditions all patients have **an equal claim** to receive the health care they need
- During a pandemic, difficult decisions will need to be made about which health services to maintain and which to defer.
- Depending on the severity of the event

## **8. Trust:**

- Essential component of the relationships between clinicians and patients, staff and their organizations, the public and health care providers or organizations and among organizations within a health system.
- Trust is enhanced by upholding such process values transparently.

## **9. Solidarity:**

A pandemic can challenge conventional ideas of national sovereignty, security or territoriality. It also requires solidarity within and among health care institutions.

## **10. Stewardship:** (monitoring)

- People entrusted with governance roles should be guided by the notion of stewardship. Inherent in stewardship are the notions of trust, ethical behaviour and good decision-making. This implies that decisions regarding resources are intended to achieve the best patient health and public health outcomes.



# Five procedural values

## **1. Reasonable:**

Decisions should be based on reasons (i.e. evidence, principles and values) that stakeholders can agree are relevant to meeting health needs in a pandemic emergency.

## **2. Open and transparent:**

The process by which decisions are made must be open to scrutiny, and the basis on which decisions are made should be publicly accessible.

## **3. Inclusive:**

Decisions should be made explicitly with stakeholders' views in mind, and stakeholders should have opportunities to engage in the decision-making process.

#### **4. Responsive:**

There should be opportunities to revisit decisions. There should be mechanisms to address disputes and complaints.

#### **5. Accountable:**

There should be mechanisms in place to ensure that decision-makers are answerable for their actions and inactions. Defence of actions and inactions should be grounded in the 14 other ethical values discussed

# SUMMARY

- Triage is the process to decide on the type and priority of care
- Decisions about allocation can be guided by a number of ethical principles but should also take into consideration the amount of resources, the ease of obtaining a new supply, the demand for resources and the personnel available to distribute and/ or administer the resources.
- Regardless of which triage protocol is chosen, it is essential that the ethical justification be explicit.

