

Norden, Nordic Committee on Bioethics

Conference on Public Health – Ethical Issues, Reykjavik, Iceland, 30 and 31 August 2010

Abstract

'Ethics in public health: is it really needed as a discipline?'

The present conference deals with a series of themes, which demonstrate that the ethical challenges in public health are huge. In public health, decision makers both accept and take responsibility for whole populations and population groups, without their individual members necessarily demanding such responsibility. Public health practice thus reflects the overall political philosophy and culture of a given society and of health policy in particular. This to some extent contrasts the situation in clinical medicine, where the individual patient is in focus and typically actively demands medical scrutiny and intervention, even if he or she has to leave the final choice of service offered to professional decision. Considering the implications of public health intervention – or lack of intervention - for population health, these challenges call for intensive scrutiny based on at least theoretical competencies within public health besides competencies within ethics. Thus, a specific scientific discipline integrating, on one side, public health theory and practice, and on the other side philosophy in general, the philosophy of science, and ethics could be relevant for the development of ethical foundations for future public health programmes.

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