

Public Health - Ethical Issues

The Nordic Committee on Bioethics organised a conference in Reykjavik in August 2010 to hear expert views and discuss issues related to public health. The programme was divided into three sessions: 1) Individual Freedom and Public Health, 2) Health Responsibility and Life Style, and 3) Social Equality and Justice. The conference attracted ca 140 participants.

During the last decade, the need for a specific Public Health Ethics has emerged. Public Health Ethics has been defined as being ‘concerned with the ethical issues that arise from all aspects of public health theory and practise’. Pandemics (SARS, Swine Flu) explain part of the need, but also rapidly expanding non-communicable diseases (NCDs) mostly due to unhealthy life-style choices generate ethical debate around policies and responsibilities surrounding health. Further, increasing health inequalities raise concern. Issues relating to health promotion and disease prevention in the population have not been on the agenda of bioethics that has concentrated mostly on issues relating to modern biotechnology and their applications. Autonomy has been the key concept, which as a sole value does not fit very well to the public health approach. Also medical ethics is mostly interested in the doctor-patient relationship in the clinical setting.

Speakers presenting different disciplines addressed these issues from various views. It became evident that attempts to improve public health are challenging for many reasons, and more discussions and more evidence are needed. For instance, there are opposing views of the real impact of cancer screening programmes and doubt whether health policies are always based on evidence in the first place.



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The Nordic Committee on Bioethics (NCBio) was founded in 1989 to promote Nordic cooperation and exchange of information between scientists, parliamentarians, opinion leaders and public officials in the area of bioethics. NCBio organise yearly public conferences and symposia. The Committee publishes reports and other publications to promote Nordic and international debate on bioethical issues.

Presentations from the conference can be seen at the homepage for the Nordic Committee on Bioethics <http://www.ncbio.org/> and manuscripts from the speakers will be published in a future report from the committee.

Nordic Committee on Bioethics

Classic ethical tension in public health lies between individual liberty rights and compulsory measures in the name of public health protection: how to protect people from dangerous communicable diseases while at the same time taking into account individual rights and freedom of movement. Nevertheless, it was argued that liberty is an important value, but with no claim to priority.

Many of today's burdening health problems are related to life style. But it is not as clear who is responsible for health of the individual. Can the state use paternalistic measures to guide people to the right course? One central question was 'do people have a right to live an unhealthy life?' Even though many theories might justify public health intervention to promote people to live healthy lives, the answer is not simple; not least due to a difficulty to define key concepts. It was also suggested that a major epidemic of our times, obesity, should first and foremost be seen as a social problem because an increasing number of children and adults are living in an environment that makes it more and more difficult for them to live healthy lives.

Poverty is one of the issues underlying poor health and increasing health inequalities. Based on the WHO report on Social Determinants of Health, early childhood conditions are crucial for development and later health in adulthood. Presentations indicated that Nordic welfare states have not been able to manage socio-economical

factors affecting childhood adequately: health inequalities exist and are increasing in the Nordic countries. Many underlying reasons can be suggested, but the overall challenge concern policy-making in all the fields; daily living conditions, environment, equal distribution of resources, market responsibility. Moreover, these policies should have a life-course perspective. Particular focus should be targeted on marginalised or vulnerable populations. But above all, it was claimed, effective health improvement policies and practices should be purely evidence-driven and evidence-based.



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The Nordic Committee on Bioethics will publish a book in 2011 where speakers of the conference have written articles based on their talks.