

# Utilitarianism in Public Health

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How can we perceive and address ethical challenges in public health practice and policy? One way is by using ethical concepts to shed light on everyday practice. One does not have to be a specialist in ethics to do so. This document is part of a series of papers intended to introduce practitioners to some concepts, values, principles, theories and approaches that are important to public health ethics.

## Introduction

Many authors argue that public health interventions and programs are rooted in utilitarian ethics (Holland, 2007; Horner, 2000; Nixon & Forman, 2008; Rothstein, 2004; Royo-Bordonada & Román-Maestre, 2015). For example, Royo-Bordonada and Román-Maestre write that “public health is in essence [...] utilitarian because it seeks to preserve the health status (something that contributes to the well-being of persons) of the maximum number of individuals possible, ideally the entire population” (2015, p. 3). Roberts and Reich (2002) also assert that the utilitarian perspective seems particularly intuitive to those working in public health. According to these authors, utilitarian ethics would therefore seem to be well suited as a theory for evaluating and justifying the morality of public health interventions and programs and, by extension, for determining what we should and should not do in the area of public health.

But what is utilitarianism? What are its main strengths? What are the main ways in which it has been critiqued? And what role should utilitarianism play in public health? In this short document, we will try to respond briefly to these four questions, showing, in particular, that the presumed link between public health practice and utilitarian ethics is not as evident as it may seem at first glance. Since utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory, we will begin by discussing what that means.

## What is a normative ethical theory?

A normative ethical theory (also referred to as moral theory) is a systematic conception of what, morally, we should and should not do, both individually and collectively. Such a theory can guide decision making and justify or evaluate the morality of actions, interventions and public policies (Dawson, 2010, p. 193). Several normative ethical theories exist, including utilitarianism, Kantianism and deontological theories, rights-based theories and virtue ethics.

Normative ethical theories generally incorporate two essential components: a theory of the good and a theory of the right (Rawls, 1971). The theory of the good (also called value theory or axiology) defines the good, i.e., that which has moral value (Pettit, 1993). Autonomy, friendship, self-respect, solidarity, health, well-being or pleasure, for example, may have moral value. The theory of the right determines what is the right thing to do, with respect for the good, for individual and institutional agents (Pettit, 1993). They might have to respect or promote solidarity, for example.

## What is utilitarianism?

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory that identifies the good with utility and the right with that which maximizes utility. Thus, according to utilitarianism, utility is the value that should guide actions, programs and policies. Our moral obligation, the right thing to do, is to maximize utility.

### THE GOOD IS UTILITY

For utilitarianism, the good, or that which has value, is **utility and only utility**. But what is utility? Since the first systematic formulations of utilitarianism in the 19th century, many definitions of utility have been proposed, giving rise to different versions of utilitarianism. We will briefly present the four main conceptions of utility. You may notice that in these four conceptions there is

an evolution from the immediate and pleasure-pain related to the longer-term, rational and planning for overall interests or well-being related.

### **Utility is pleasure and the absence of suffering**

In its earliest formulations, utility (or the good) was associated with pleasure and the absence of suffering, and evil (or the bad) was associated with suffering and the privation of pleasure (Bentham, 1961 [1789]; Mill, 1998 [1861]; Sidgwick, 1907 [1874]).

### **Utility is the satisfaction of preferences**

Some authors view utility instead in terms of the satisfaction of individual preferences (Hare, 1981; Harsanyi, 1977; Singer, 1993). This is probably the most influential approach today (Goodin, 1993) and the one underpinning cost-benefit economic analyses that make particular use of the willingness-to-pay method to identify the preferences of individuals (Roberts & Reich, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

### **Utility is the satisfaction of informed or rational preferences**

Utility has also been defined in terms of the preferences that individuals would have if they had all the information and cognitive abilities needed to make informed choices (Brandt, 1979). Such a conception of utility thus moves away from preferences that individuals have, for example, when they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or when they are about to make a choice and do not have all the relevant information.

### **Utility is the satisfaction of interests**

Moving still further away from preferences expressed by individuals, some utilitarian theories define utility as the satisfaction of certain basic interests shared by all, such as being healthy or having a dwelling. These interests concern “resources that will be necessary for people to have before pursuing any of the more particular preferences that they might happen to have” (Goodin, 1993, p. 244).

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the links between utilitarianism and various methods of economic evaluation, as well as a discussion and a critique of the main ethical implications of economic evaluations, see Rozworski and Bellefleur (2013) and Rozworski (2014).

## **THE RIGHT IS THAT WHICH MAXIMIZES THE GOOD**

The other essential component of a normative ethical theory is a theory of the right which determines what people and institutional agents must do with respect to the good. Utilitarian theories are **consequentialist** in that they determine the moral value of actions, policies or institutional arrangements with reference solely to their consequences (Honderich, 1995) and not, for example, with reference to certain inherent characteristics of actions or to the intentions of moral agents. In other words, for consequentialists, and thus for utilitarians, no action is either right or wrong (good or bad) in itself. Instead actions are conceived of as instruments that may be more or less useful, more or less effective and efficient, for doing good. In the case of utilitarianism, the moral value of actions, policies, practices or rules is therefore determined on the basis of their effects on the amount of utility in the world (Honderich, 1995).

To determine the value of various options being considered, utilitarians apply the **utility calculus**. The utility calculus determines the net amount of utility produced by an action or policy. The net utility is the sum of the utility produced (e.g., the sum of pleasures resulting from the action) minus the sum of the utility lost (e.g., the resultant suffering or loss of pleasures).

Utilitarianism is said to be **impartial**, because each “unit” of utility (each satisfied preference, for example) holds equal weight in the utility calculus. In other words, the pleasures, preferences or interests of each person must be taken into account and they have the same value, regardless of whose they are (Honderich, 1995). Because utilitarianism requires the maximization of utility, the right thing to do is not simply that which produces utility, but that which, from an impartial standpoint, produces the most utility.

But how does one perform the utility calculus and thus determine what should be done? There are two main ways of calculating utility, giving rise to two types of utilitarianism: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism.

### **Act utilitarianism**

Most utilitarian theories require that each action or policy be examined to determine which would maximize utility in a specific context. The action or policy that produces the greatest net utility is, therefore, the one that is morally obligatory. Since

acts are directly subjected to the utility calculus, the terms **direct consequentialism** and **act utilitarianism** are used (Honderich, 1995).

### Rule utilitarianism

Some utilitarian theories require instead that actions or policies comply with rules which, when followed, generally allow utility to be maximized. Actions and policies being considered are thus morally obligatory (or right) not when they maximize utility in a specific context, but when they conform to rules which, in general, maximize utility. Since actions or policies are not directly subjected to the utility calculus (which instead is applied to the rules with which actions and policies must comply) the terms **indirect consequentialism** and **rule utilitarianism** are used (Honderich, 1995).

Let us consider a simple example that illustrates the difference between these two theories of the right. In certain contexts, lying to a patient could prove to be the option that maximizes utility, for example when a lie can spare a patient unnecessary stress and when there is no risk of its being discovered. Act utilitarianism would lead to the conclusion that it is therefore morally obligatory to lie under such circumstances. Rule utilitarianism would instead necessitate the following line of inquiry: would a rule allowing one to lie to patients produce, in general, more utility than another rule that, for example, prohibits lying to patients? Depending on the result of the utility calculus applied to these two rules, a rule utilitarian might conclude that patients should not be lied to, even in cases where a lie would produce more utility.

#### Summary – What is utilitarianism?

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory according to which our moral obligation is to maximize the good, i.e., utility. Utility is defined in terms of pleasure and suffering, or the satisfaction of preferences or interests. According to act utilitarianism, our moral obligation is to pursue the action, intervention or policy that would maximize utility in the specific context in which such an option is being considered. According to rule utilitarianism, on the other hand, our moral obligation would be to pursue the option that complies with a rule that, in general, maximizes utility.

## What are utilitarianism's main strengths?

### SIMPLE AND INTUITIVE

The simplicity of utilitarianism derives from the fact that it is an ethical theory that relies on a single principle: the principle of utility. Utilitarianism, therefore, does not require a procedure for arbitrating between different principles that may enter into conflict (for example, autonomy and equity or the right to privacy and the right to information), and is spared the arbitrariness and complexity that such a procedure may seem to introduce into moral evaluation (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994). Supported by quantitative methods for calculating utility, utilitarianism thus offers an ethical approach which tends to issue clearer, simpler and more precise answers than rival approaches.

Its simplicity also derives from its theory of the right which can be summed up as the requirement to maximize good in the world. And this is also very intuitive (Kymlicka, 2002; Rawls, 1971). Indeed, it is commonly accepted that it is sometimes better to suffer a little, by regularly visiting a dentist for example, or even to deny oneself the satisfaction of certain preferences today, by studying for example, in order to have more pleasure or satisfy more preferences later. It is also very intuitive to weigh advantages and disadvantages before acting and to choose the option that provides the greatest net benefit.

### EVERYONE'S UTILITY IS TREATED EQUALLY

Utilitarianism is an impartial ethical theory. Thus, the utility calculation which is applied to every action or rule, treats with strict equality the pleasure/suffering, preferences or interests of all those who may be affected. The objective is to maximize utility in general and not only or primarily the utility of those preferred by an agent or a social group (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994). Utilitarianism, in particular when it is applied to social and political decisions, can thus be viewed as an ethical theory which treats individuals fairly by taking into account the utility of each and treating it on a strictly equal basis (Kymlicka, 2002).

### **UTILITARIANISM IS “A STRONG WEAPON” FOR CALLING INTO QUESTION THE CONCENTRATION OF RESOURCES AND POWER (KYMLICKA, 2002, P. 12)**

Utilitarianism implies that any concentration of resources and power in the hands of a minority is morally unjustified unless it allows utility to be maximized. By proposing methods for calculating or quantifying this utility, utilitarians have, in effect, designed an accountability test for those who possess such power or resources. In doing so, utilitarians have provided the less well-off with a tool for judging the fairness of the privileges granted to the most affluent.

Utilitarianism can have very significant distributive implications, particularly because of the diminishing marginal utility of certain resources. In other words, the utility someone derives from the first dollar they can spend (or the first apple they can eat) in a day is much greater than the utility they derive from the millionth dollar (or the millionth apple). Utilitarianism can thus justify a massive redistribution of the resources of the most affluent, directing these toward the poorest, who will be able to derive greater utility from them.

When it originated, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the context of a society where resources were concentrated in the hands of a minority, utilitarianism thus offered a critique of society that could be characterized as progressive and was a source of inspiration and justification for social and health reforms that benefited the majority of the population (Kymlicka, 2002).

### **UTILITARIANISM CAN JUSTIFY INFRINGING ON INDIVIDUAL PREFERENCES TO PROMOTE A COMMON GOOD**

In seeking to maximize utility, utilitarianism can justify the promotion and protection of a common or collective good even when it is necessary to infringe on certain individual preferences or moral “rights.” Thus, utilitarianism could morally justify the forced quarantine of people refusing to get vaccinated during a pandemic, or even oblige them to get vaccinated if this option would maximize utility.

Depending on one’s perspective, this characteristic of utilitarianism can be thought of as one of its strengths (if one thinks that the common good must sometimes take precedence over the individual’s “right” to autonomy or privacy, for example) or as one of its weaknesses (if one thinks, conversely, that

individuals should be better protected from constraints that may be placed on them on behalf of a common good). For the moment, suffice it to stress that a utilitarian perspective can justify taking action in cases, among others, where a “minor” infringement of individual interests would produce significant gains in utility at the population level (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994).

## **What are the main criticisms of utilitarianism?**

### **UTILITARIANISM IS TOO DEMANDING**

According to utilitarianism, we have a moral obligation to always act from an impartial standpoint so as to generate the most utility, or to always follow the rules which allow us to do so. This is a very demanding proposition, too demanding for many. Beauchamp and Childress (1994), for example, write that utilitarians ask “that we act like saints who are without personal interests and goals” (p. 54), because these interests and goals have no particular moral status for utilitarians. In other words, for utilitarians, there is no more justification, at least *a priori*, for pursuing our own goals or for helping our friends, our children, our patients or our community than for pursuing the goals of others or for helping strangers. This is why utilitarianism is referred to as an agent-neutral theory.

This criticism of the impartial maximization of utility probably holds more weight when utilitarianism is used to guide the decisions and actions of individuals than when it serves solely to evaluate public policies and institutional arrangements. In the first case, it can indeed seem strange and overly demanding to assign no special status to personal relationships or to goals that individuals wish to pursue. On the other hand, demanding that our public policies be impartial and that they maximize utility seems from the outset less strange and could even be regarded as one of utilitarianism’s strengths. When the scope of utilitarianism is limited to public policies and institutional arrangements, this is referred to as **political utilitarianism** (Kymlicka, 2002).

### **THE UTILITY CALCULATION IS NOT AS SIMPLE AS IT SEEMS**

According to the utilitarian approach, one must measure the utility produced by various options and

choose the one that produces the most utility. While the principle is simple, its implementation can prove difficult. Indeed, to calculate utility, one must identify, measure and compare the effects of actions or rules on types of good that sometimes differ greatly from each other (varying types of pleasure and suffering, preferences or interests). Added to the difficulties associated with comparing different goods are those associated with comparing different persons, who may react differently to the same good or the same evil. For example, a permanent knee injury can represent a decrease in utility that is different for an athlete than for an office worker.

When one is comparing and evaluating policy options that affect many people and touch on different facets of their lives, the complexity of the utility calculation becomes evident. Given a specific budget, for example, will the most utility be produced by the addition of a certain number of social housing units, of a certain number of psychoeducators in schools or of a certain number of hospital beds? If the utility of different options cannot be calculated and compared due to excessive complexity, lack of data, or for other reasons, then utilitarianism loses its appeal as a practical guide to decision making. Moreover, some authors criticize utilitarianism for being too cognitively demanding for moral agents and for leading to a kind of paralysis during decision making (Friedman, 1989).

**“UTILITARIANISM DOES NOT TAKE SERIOUSLY THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PERSONS” (RAWLS, 1971, P. 27)**

We stated above that utilitarianism is intuitive, in particular, because it generalizes to all decisions the principle according to which it is rational for an individual to accept a small amount of suffering so as to obtain greater pleasure. According to Rawls, “[t]he principle of choice for an association of men is interpreted as an extension of the principle of choice for one man” (Rawls, 1971, p. 24). However, there is a significant difference between choices that concern a single individual and those that concern a plurality of persons. When an individual chooses to suffer a little to obtain greater pleasure, the result is a net increase in utility for that individual, who both sustains the loss and benefits from the gain. When a policy that imposes a small amount of suffering so as to create a greater amount of pleasure is adopted, the net utility also increases, but some people may suffer the loss while others benefit from the gain (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 52, note 16). This is what leads

Rawls to conclude that utilitarianism does not “take seriously the distinction between persons” (Rawls, 1971, p. 27).

According to Mackie, “on a utilitarian view, transferring a satisfaction from one person to another, while preserving its magnitude, makes no morally significant difference” (1984, p. 87). In other words, what matters to a utilitarian is the net utility, and not its distribution among individuals or groups. The option that maximizes utility will always be just because utilitarianism does not include a principle of justice independent of the principle of utility. For Rawls, given that certain decisions (including policy decisions) affect a plurality of persons, the ethics guiding those decisions must include an independent principle of justice that can counterbalance the principle of utility. Accepting this argument amounts to a rejection of the idea that ethics can depend solely on the principle of utility and, by extension, of utilitarianism.

**TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY**

Although one of utilitarianism’s strengths lies in the fact that it can be a strong weapon for calling into question the concentration of resources and power in the hands of a minority, the reverse side of this strength is that utilitarianism can be used to justify the oppression of minorities if this increases utility for the majority. This is the source of the idea that utilitarianism could justify a tyranny of the majority. This criticism, which ties in with the previous one, is perhaps strongest when applied to “the comparison of small benefits to many individuals with large benefits to a much smaller number of individuals” (Brock, 2009, p. 119), as when the utility produced by the relief of many headaches is compared to that produced by a few heart transplants.

To illustrate this criticism using an example from another political field, consider the opposition between the preference for driving quickly and the preference for not being injured while crossing the street on foot. Regardless of the amount of utility attributed to each preference, if there are enough people who prefer to drive quickly, this preference will take precedence over the safety of a minority of pedestrians. “Thus, utilitarianism not only allows, but enjoins, in some circumstances, that the benefit (utility) of ‘the many’ might be ‘purchased’ at the cost of the undeserved and uncompensated misery of ‘the few’” (Hann & Peckham, 2010, p. 141).

## THE END CANNOT JUSTIFY ALL MEANS

Utilitarianism, as a consequentialist theory, evaluates the morality of actions or policies solely on the basis of their consequences for the amount of utility in the world. The means used to obtain a given quantity of utility are thus included in the utility calculation, but they have no particular moral status. Thus, the end can justify the use of means that may seem morally dubious. Indeed, utilitarianism may call for its proponents to lie, to cause suffering, to constrain people, or to oppress, discriminate against, marginalize or stigmatize people, for example, when such practices maximize utility. For many, the use of certain means cannot be justified by the need to maximize utility, because these means contravene other important ethical principles, such as autonomy, the right to physical integrity, etc., which have no distinct place in utilitarian thought (Hann & Peckham, 2010).

## NOT ALL PLEASURES OR PREFERENCES ARE EQUAL

The last critique of utilitarianism presented here concerns the inclusion of pleasures and preferences which, according to other ethical perspectives, should not be included in the utility calculus, but whose exclusion is difficult to justify within a utilitarian framework (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994). It is this type of criticism, among others, that led to the evolution of the different conceptions of utility as outlined on pages 1-2 above (in the section entitled 'The good is utility') from the more immediate pleasure/pain to the more rational interest-based conceptions of utility.

Based solely on the principle of utility, it is difficult to justify excluding from the utility calculus the pleasures of a sadistic person or discriminatory or racist preferences, for example. Similarly, but inversely, it is difficult to avoid assigning greater moral significance to satisfying the preferences of popular people, with large families or many friends, than to satisfying the preferences of less popular people, with small families and few friends, because satisfying the former allows the preferences of many others (known as external preferences) to be satisfied at the same time (Kymlicka, 2002). It can also be difficult to exclude or treat differently so-called "adaptive" preferences, i.e., the preferences of persons who have adapted to adverse situations by gradually abandoning preferences that they have little chance of satisfying (Kymlicka, 2002). We might consider, as just one example, the preferences of

persons belonging to social groups that are subjected to discriminatory social practices, or persons who are socially and economically disadvantaged and have therefore abandoned the hope of pursuing higher education or of securing a well-paid job, for example. However, to make pursuing the satisfaction of adaptive preferences a moral objective is to run the risk of perpetuating, or even aggravating, situations that would best be described as "unjust," but which are difficult to characterize as such from a utilitarian perspective.

According to some authors, the only way to adequately filter or address such pleasures or preferences is to abandon the utilitarian perspective by including principles other than utility in ethical reflection, such as a principle of distributive justice or of social justice (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994; Rawls, 1971). The weight of this criticism is probably less and less the more that we move from a conception of utility as the preferences or pleasures of individuals towards more rational or informed preferences or interests.

## What role should utilitarianism play in public health?

Should utilitarian theory be used to guide and evaluate public health actions, programs and interventions? In other words, should public health maximize utility and should it only maximize utility? We will examine three possible responses.

### PUBLIC HEALTH SHOULD ADOPT UTILITARIANISM

Those who would answer "yes" to the question of whether public health practice should only maximize utility will likely stress the strengths of utilitarian thought along with four characteristics of utilitarianism that seem consistent with public health practice:

1. As with utilitarianism, one of the aims of public health is to **maximize the presence of a good**, namely the health of the population. Public health actions are thus evaluated, at least in part, on the basis of the gains and losses they entail for the health of the population (Cribb, 2010; Holland, 2007 and 2010). Several tools have been developed for carrying out such evaluations, including economic tools such as the quality-adjusted life years (QALY) index or the disability-adjusted life years (DALY) index,

which are central to cost/utility economic evaluations.<sup>2</sup> **Effectiveness** and **efficiency** are thus important factors in evaluating actions, programs, and interventions as objectively as possible, both in public health and for utilitarians.

2. In the field of public health, as in utilitarian thought, special attention is paid to consequences. In public health, emphasis is placed on the health of the population. Sometimes more emphasis seems to be placed on the consequences of a specific act or intervention (as with **direct consequentialism**), such as when the positive and negative effects associated with the decision to declare a specific building unsuitable for habitation are being evaluated and one of the consequences would be the eviction of current tenants. At other times, more emphasis seems to be placed on the consequences related to the guidelines, rules of conduct or professional standards which will apply to a multitude of cases (as with **indirect consequentialism**), such as when establishing guidelines that restaurant inspectors will have to observe to ensure safety.
3. As with utilitarianism, public health seeks to achieve an effect at the **population level** and not, initially, at the individual level. It follows that public health sometimes calls for interventions that negatively affect some individuals, but improve the collective health of the population (Cribb, 2010; Nixon & Forman, 2008).
4. As with utilitarianism, the justification for government-led public health actions, programs and interventions is usually based on an **impartial** point of view. Public health authorities and practitioners usually justify their actions on the basis of their populational effects and not, for example, on the basis of their effects on people with whom they have personal relationships or on groups that they might favour.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Although economic evaluations that seek to determine the cost per QALY gained are called “cost/utility evaluations,” the way utility is conceived of here is quite different from the way it is conceived of in utilitarianism. To learn more about the difference between the utility of utilitarians and the QALY of health economists, see, for example, Dolan (2001).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that public health authorities and practitioners sometimes assign greater importance to certain groups within the population for reasons relating to equity, by investing, for example, more resources in improving the health of hard-to-reach populations. Impartiality, that is, equal treatment of the utility of each person, and equity are in tension here, which suggests the need for a principle of justice or equity independent of the utility principle in public health; whereas, within utilitarianism, equitable and impartial treatment

These four characteristics, in addition to the simple and intuitive nature of utilitarianism, probably explain the attraction of the utilitarian perspective for public health actors.

### **PUBLIC HEALTH SHOULD NOT ADOPT UTILITARIANISM**

Conversely, those who would answer “no” to the question of whether public health practice should only maximize utility will likely stress the previously mentioned criticisms of utilitarianism, as well as three major differences between the goals and practices of public health with those of utilitarianism:

1. **Health** and **utility** are two concepts with multiple meanings which may overlap to varying degrees, but which are not usually treated as synonyms. Thus, if health is only one aspect of utility or if utility is only one aspect of health, then maximizing health will not produce the same result as maximizing utility (Holland, 2007). In fact, public health advocates are accused of “healthism” when they forget that health is not the only good that can have moral value and, moreover, that it is not a good that necessarily always takes precedence over others (Cribb, 2010, p. 25).
2. Next, while the (or one) purpose of public health is to maximize the health of the population, it is acknowledged by many that **another of its purposes is to reduce health inequalities** (Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal, 2012; Butler-Jones, 2008; Powers & Faden, 2006). As soon as one claims the ability to justify interventions or policies that are somewhat less effective at improving the general level of population health, but that reduce health inequalities, one must concede that public health is not guided solely by a principle of maximization (of health). Thus, public health ethics cannot be based on a single principle, as is utilitarianism. If one considers that public health has two independent purposes, namely, maximizing population health and reducing health inequalities (Powers & Faden, 2006), then public health ethics should include, at the minimum, a **principle of equity or justice** in addition to a principle of health maximization.

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calls for equal treatment using a calculation designed to maximize utility. In other words, this tension does not exist within utilitarianism.

3. Finally, although special attention is focused on the consequences of public health actions, programs and interventions, evaluation of the latter is rarely limited to consideration of their effectiveness and efficiency at fostering one or more goals. Therefore, public health practice cannot be considered purely **consequentialist**. This does not mean that it should not be; however, to reflect public health practice, most frameworks for public health ethics include certain values, respect for which is intended to guide the choice of means used to achieve objectives. Often included, for example, are respect for the autonomy of individuals and communities, or the fair and equitable treatment of individuals and groups. If one views such values as important to public health, then one does not believe that public health should focus solely on the consequences of its practices for population health (and for health inequalities). Thus, one does not believe it should be purely consequentialist, and by extension, utilitarian.

#### **PUBLIC HEALTH SHOULD ADOPT THE UTILITY PRINCIPLE, BUT NOT UTILITARIANISM**

The approach which seems to prevail in public health ethics is positioned somewhere between the adoption and the rejection of utilitarian theory. It consists of retaining the utility principle, while rejecting the utilitarian claim of being able to base the entire field of public health ethics on this single principle (e.g., Baum, Gollust, Goold & Jacobson, 2007; Childress et al., 2002; Childress, 2013; Holland, 2007; Massé, 2003; World Health Organization, 2007). Strictly speaking, this approach is equivalent to a rejection of utilitarianism, because the maximization of utility alone is no longer advocated (Honderich, 1995). The utility principle effectively loses its status as a fundamental and primary principle and is placed instead on an equal footing with other principles (equity, justice, autonomy, etc.) that must also be taken into consideration during ethical reflection and deliberation.

Thus, one form or another of the utility principle is found in many public health ethics frameworks. It is often referred to as a principle of the proportionality of risks, costs, burdens and benefits (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994; Schröder-Bäck, Duncan, Sherlaw, Brall & Czabanowska, 2014; Singer et al., 2003; Selgelid, 2009). Sometimes, its characteristics are divided among several principles (e.g., principles of

effectiveness and efficiency), but it is always accompanied by other principles that can limit its application and relevance during the evaluation of specific cases.

This principle-based approach is inspired by principlism, an approach developed by Beauchamp and Childress (1994) for biomedical or clinical ethics. It aims primarily to combine the strengths and neutralize the weaknesses of various principles taken in isolation, leaving the relevant actors to balance the various principles in specific cases.<sup>4</sup>

### How to use this document

For public health actors who use ethics frameworks that incorporate the utility principle, this document should help you to:

- Understand the significance others attach to the utility principle during deliberations;
- Determine what the utility principle could be used to justify based on different conceptions of utility (pleasure/suffering, informed, rational or existing preferences, interests) and of obligation (act or rule utilitarianism);
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the utility principle when reflecting on and discussing a specific case;
- Judge the relevance of the utility principle for a specific case;
- Arbitrate between the requirements of the utility principle and the requirements of other principles considered relevant to a given situation.

This document can also help public health actors to perceive and critique the limitations of a utilitarian approach to public health or, for those who have adopted such an approach, to review their conception of utilitarianism in response to the criticisms raised.

<sup>4</sup> To learn more about principlism, its strengths and weaknesses, and its ties to public health frameworks, see Keeling and Bellefleur (2016).



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