

Adapted Summary of a Public Health Ethics Framework ten Have et al. (2012)

An Ethical Framework for the Prevention of Overweight and Obesity: A Tool for Thinking Through a Programme's Ethical Aspects

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This short document presents an adapted summary of the framework proposed by ten Have et al. in 2012. We originally produced this summary for use during a workshop offered in March 2015.¹ We have adapted this and other summaries of frameworks and republished them together so that they might be used in combination with the very brief public health ethics cases that we have produced to date. They are intended to give public health practitioners some material for practice in ethical deliberation.

Marieke ten Have and colleagues set out to produce a framework “for making transparent what the potentially ethically problematic aspects of a programme are and for evaluating to what extent a programme to prevent overweight or obesity is acceptable from an ethical point of view” (2012, p. 299). This document presents the framework in two parts. The first part contains primary and secondary questions to inform deliberation. It is important to note that each of the primary questions is equally important (2012, p. 300). The second part proposes steps for applying the framework. The document concludes by referring to a selection of resources for further reading.

1. Eight primary questions

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM AFFECT PHYSICAL HEALTH?

Is there evidence for its effectiveness?

Is it cost-effective?

Does it have unintended negative health effects?

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM AFFECT PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING?

Does it have (unintended) negative psychosocial effects?

Does the program contribute to the stigmatization of overweight and obesity?

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM AFFECT EQUALITY?

Are there groups in the population with a higher incidence of persons who are overweight or obese?

How does the program affect these groups compared to other groups?

Does the program reduce or increase health inequalities?

Does the program unjustly discriminate?

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM AFFECT INFORMED CHOICE?

Does the program promote informed choice or does it “involve inadequate information and provide unclear, overstated, oversimplified, subjective, incomplete or even false messages” (2012, p. 301)?

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM AFFECT SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUES?

Does the program include “measures aimed at changing people’s personal lifestyles [that] interfere with the social and cultural value of food” (2012, p. 301)?

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM AFFECT PRIVACY?

Does the program ask for personal information?

Who is gathering the information, and how?

Is confidentiality an issue?

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM AFFECT THE ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITIES?

Are responsibilities fairly balanced between individuals, groups and society?

“Every preventive programme expresses ideas about who must take action to prevent overweight or obesity: individual citizens, parents, schools, the government, the industry or a combination of these. However, a program is ethically problematic if it goes against a ‘just division of responsibilities’ or the ‘balance between individual and collective responsibility’ ” (2012, p. 301).

¹ The PowerPoint and handouts are available online at: http://www.ncchpp.ca/128/Presentations.ccnpps?id_article=1375

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM AFFECT LIBERTY?

Does the program constrain liberty?

Does it enable people or communities?

“[I]t is sometimes overlooked that there is a thin line between enabling healthy choices and unwelcome intrusion. [...] Attempting to limit someone's actions or to require actions by someone for his or her own good is called 'paternalism'. Paternalistic programmes evoke moral objections because not all people consider health to be the only or the most important valuable thing in life” (2012, p. 301).

2. Applying the framework in eight steps

Describe the program's main ethical weaknesses.

Describe its main ethical strengths.

Discuss whether it is possible to adjust the program in order to maximize its strengths and minimize its weaknesses.

Discuss whether the program is likely to be effective in preventing overweight and obesity.

Discuss whether the program's strengths outweigh its weaknesses.

Discuss whether there is an alternative program with fewer ethical weaknesses.

Discuss whether sound justification can be provided for the remaining weaknesses.

Define whether and under what conditions the program is acceptable from an ethical point of view.

Resources and additional reading

Adapted summaries of public health ethics frameworks and cases: http://www.ncchpp.ca/127/Publications.ccnpps?id_article=1525

A repertoire of ethics frameworks for public health (with links to the documents): http://www.ncchpp.ca/08/Repertoire_of_Frameworks.ccnpps

Population and Public Health Ethics: Cases from research, policy, and practice: http://www.ncchpp.ca/127/publications.ccnpps?id_article=720

Example of the application of ten Have et al.'s (2012) framework in practice:

Kasch, F. (n.d.). *Ethical aspects of the Japanese programme to prevent lifestyle related diseases*. Osaka University. Retrieved from: <http://ir.lib.csmu.edu.tw:8080/bitstream/310902500/12492/1/%E5%8F%B0%E7%81%A3%E9%86%AB%E5%AD%B8%E4%BA%BA%E6%96%87v14n1n2-13-26.pdf>

Reference

ten Have, M., van der Heide, A., Mackenbach, J. P., & Beaufort, I. D. (2012). An ethical framework for the prevention of overweight and obesity: a tool for thinking through a programme's ethical aspects. *European Journal of Public Health, 23*(2), 299-305. Retrieved from: <http://eurpub.oxfordjournals.org/content/eurpub/23/2/299.full.pdf>

Questions or comments?

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