

Ethics and Decision Making in Public Health

Health, ethics, social norms
and democracy

GARDER
notre monde
ENSANTÉ

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- Sustainable development, economics and democracy

Ethics

2 levels:

- Societal: decisions on public interventions (intervene: yes or no)
- Technical: the rigour of the intervention itself (how it is carried out)

- Today's presentation will not address methods and how rigorously they are applied; rather, it will focus on the decision of whether or not to intervene in a social debate on public health problems.

Ethics and decision making

- Ethics: a group of norms governing thought and behaviour?

Logic frame

- In a democratic society, elected officials are the legitimate carriers of the majority's ethics.
- These ethics and/or social norms set out what is acceptable to do or not to do.
- These social norms may be the cause of health problems.
- The public health decision maker acknowledges existing social norms and is obliged to affect change.
- The PH director has to fight the norms and those who promote them.
- The public health director's ability to change social norms depends on his or her scientific knowledge and ability to convince, as well as the population's level of education.

Examples

Traffic accidents

In the 1960s and 1970s, people drove fast while impaired, and on weekends people died, particularly young people. This was considered normal.

In the 1980s, seatbelts became technically feasible, but they weren't introduced in cars in order to keep prices down and maintain car sales. The politicians accepted this argument from the car manufacturers.

Other examples

In 1970:

- It was alright to eat meat twice a day
- Jogging in the street wasn't acceptable
- Only poor people travelled by bicycle
- Smoking was well viewed
- It was acceptable to subsidize tobacco production
- It was unacceptable to raise the price of cigarettes

Other examples

- In 1985, 2 ministers blocked the “Not without a condom” campaign.
- People were against AIDS becoming an identifiable disease.
- In 2010, sex education is no longer given in schools. Has the Internet taken its place?

Other examples

- In 2010, 90% of the MTQ's budget goes to roadwork (construction and repairs) and the rest to active transportation.
- We are building our homes farther and farther from urban centres because the taxes are lower.
- But we still want to have quick access to downtown by car.
- This causes health problems.

Ethics, democracy and social norms

- Given the causes of illness and our analytical framework, the determinants of health, we often find ourselves contesting the established order.
- However, elected officials are the legitimate upholders of the established order.

Ethics, democracy and social norms

- The issue in public health is how to change social norms: i.e. how to enhance the “health value” among the population’s other values.

Belief in the PH decision maker

- Each health problem has one or more cause that can be acted upon.
- The causes of problems are often related to ways of doing things or thinking, which are generally understood as reflecting the majority's way of thinking.

Objectives of the HP decision maker (1)

- Take what is democratically (and therefore ethically?) unacceptable now and make it acceptable in the future.
- To reduce the burden of illness for the most people possible.

Objectives of the HP decision maker (2)

- Change ways of thinking, doing, allocating resources or making laws when they create illness: i.e., work on the causes of illness.
- These ways are influenced by values, beliefs, economics, pressure groups, a certain distribution of power, our ability to influence and our credibility.

Intervention Ladder

Level 1: Do nothing/monitor

Level 2: Inform

Level 3: Make the right choice easier

Level 4: Create incentives

Level 5: Create disincentives

Level 6: Limit choices

Level 7: Eliminate choices

Example

Obesity and corn syrup

Corn syrup is used in many popular products, including soft drinks, as a sweetener.

It is used because it is inexpensive.

This boosts profit margins.

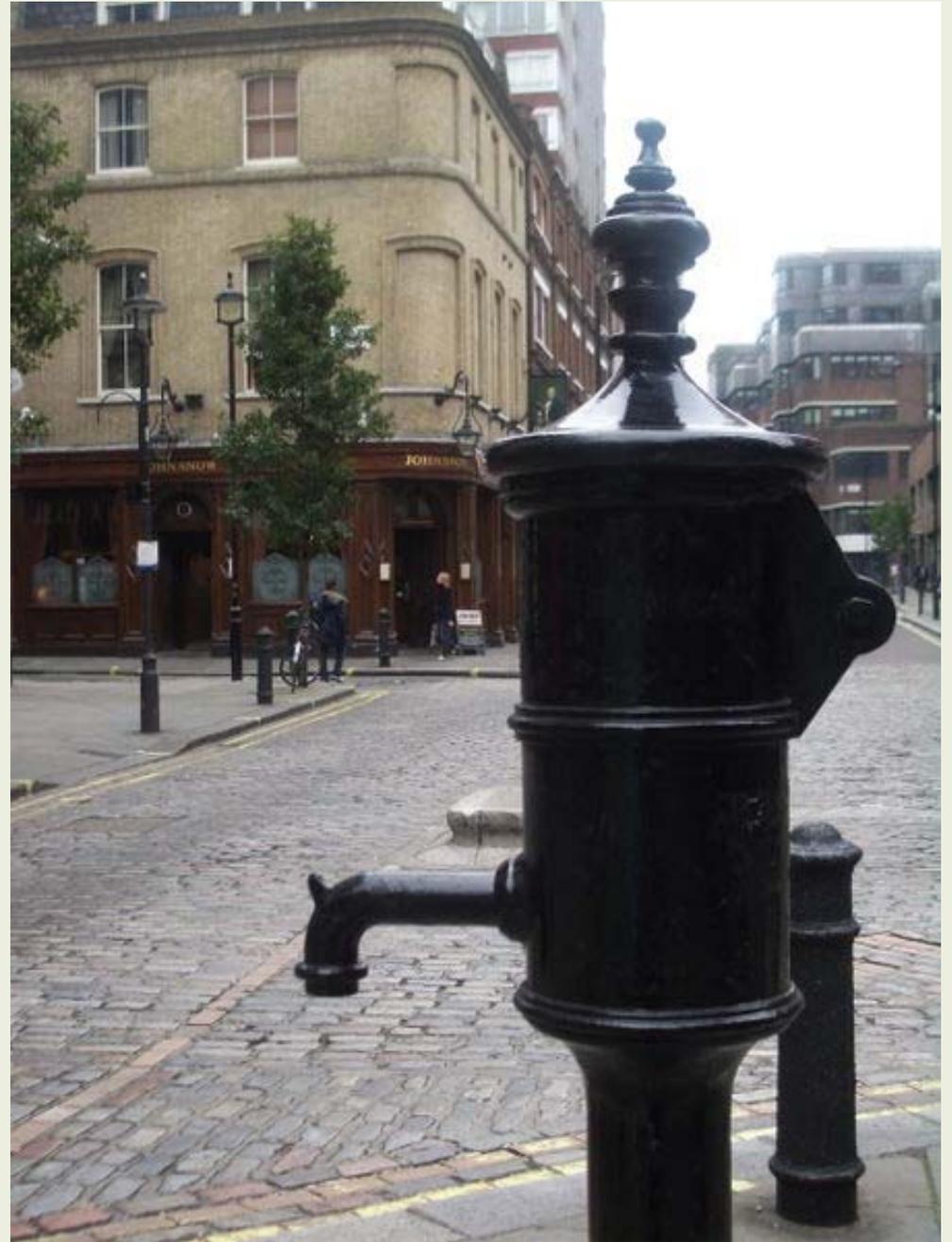
It is inexpensive because its production is heavily subsidized.

The decision to subsidize the production of corn syrup was a political decision made around 1970 in the U.S.

Therefore Americans, through their income taxes, are causing the obesity epidemic.

But few people have this information, and/or people think that it isn't true.

**John Snow:
Was the
decision he
made in 1854
“ethical”?**



What was his philosophical persuasion?

- **Utilitarian: i.e., an action is good if it attains the objectives.**
- **Libertarian: i.e., an action is good if it is centered on personal interests and human rights.**
- **Communitarian: i.e., an action is good if it emphasizes shared values, a vision of the common good and traditional practices.**

Ethical principles behind PH interventions

- Health protection is paramount
- Scientific rigour
- Equity
- Proportionality
- Precaution
- Empowerment
- Transparency
- Openness

John Snow: Was his decision in 1854 “ethical”?

Five criteria:

- Relatively high risk?
- Consistent results in the past?
- Had a dose-response relationship been shown?
- Did the dose precede the response?
- Was there a plausible explanatory mechanism?

Some public health decisions

- Campaign to reduce traffic injuries by 50% in 5 years
- Santé Québec survey
- Survey on risk factors for cardiovascular diseases and nutrition
- Campaign to encourage condom use
- Vaccination against Hepatitis A and B, HPV
- Various anti-smoking laws

Some public health decisions

- Review of the *Public Health Act*, which created Quebec's public health program
- Selection of notifiable diseases
- Themes in the annual reports: e.g., social inequalities in health, urban transportation, a question of health, etc.
- Positions taken against moving the casino and online gaming
- The 6 orientations of the Montréal Region Public Health Action Plan - *Plan d'action regional de santé publique de Montréal (PARSPM)* : review of public health activities at the local level
- Survey on school readiness and dissemination approach
- Isolation of active, untreatable cases of TB
- H1N1 vaccination campaign

My code of ethics:

Health doesn't always
win out in the end,
but we can always try.