

Outbreak at Home

Aim

1. To prepare humanitarian workers to make ethical decisions in emergency situations and in light of morally relativistic concerns.
2. Articulate and evaluate the ethical arguments for justifying a course of action.
3. Understand the moral distinction between an act in itself and the reasons for acting.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this exercise, a participant should be able to:

1. Distinguish between the different moral arguments being made.
2. Apply ethical considerations to the options available to you.
3. Discuss the use of State coercion against parental authority.
4. Discuss whether the use of State coercion for the good of the group is ever justifiable, even when some individuals disagree.

Case

There is an outbreak of a new virus in a small newly formed West African State. The virus will disfigure and possibly reduce the mental capacity of those who catch it; children appear to suffer from a greater severity of symptoms and sequelae. There is a very high chance of transmission between children, and adults may be carriers of the disease without showing symptoms. The government wants every child, regardless of whether they have had the virus or not, to attend for vaccination.

You are a parent of a child in a nearby school. A Department of Health official will deliver the vaccine at your child's school to ensure that there is 100% compliance with the vaccination. The vaccine will not be delivered unless all parents agree to and attend the vaccination provision with their child.

Despite the overwhelming medical evidence and public awareness campaigns by the government and NGOs, there are still some parents refusing to have their children vaccinated. Reasons for this include:

Religious Prohibition – God is the only one who will decide whether my child lives or dies. I must have faith that His choice as to whether my child is affected is the right choice. Intervening and getting my children vaccinated would imply that I do not trust God. I have a stronger faith than that. I will therefore not get my children vaccinated.

Ethical Prohibition (Veganism) – The vaccine comes in a pill form. The pill capsule is made out of gelatine coming from ground up animal bones and there are currently no vegan alternatives that as yet have been manufactured. I do not feel it is ethical to participate in a vaccination where animals were harmed. My health, and the health of my child, is not more important than that of an animal.

Language Barrier – The information sheet, which accompanies the vaccination announcement, is in English. There are a lot of details pertaining to how I must

care for my child post-vaccination, possible side effects, and implications of taking the vaccine. My English is only basic and I therefore require a translated sheet before I will make a decision as to whether my child can be vaccinated.

Practical Problems – While this vaccine has gone through normal clinical trials it has never been used in a vaccination programme like this. The long-term effects are therefore not known. I don't think we should take our chances. I do not want my child vaccinated.

Moral Dilemma

Do we force parents to vaccinate their children?

A School Meeting is called to decide whether the children should be vaccinated. If there is not 100% agreement about whether the children should be vaccinated, the Head Teacher will be forced to deny all children the vaccine. There will be a School Vote. You are given the following choices:

1. I am not prepared to tell some parents they have to comply with the vaccination order if it goes against their religious or moral beliefs even though I want my child to be vaccinated.
2. It is my belief that this vaccination is wrong. I know that I am creating a situation where some who want the vaccination will be denied it. I am very sorry about that but I can't help how I feel.
3. You just try and make me give that vaccination to my child! This is about parental authority and if I do not want my child to have the vaccine, for whatever reason, I cannot be made to change my mind.
4. My child is very important to me. By agreeing to the vaccination everyone will be protected and the possibility of side effects is minimal. I do not really care about anyone's moral or religious beliefs.
5. We need our children to be vaccinated. In times of emergency we cannot afford to be liberal or rights minded. We need to convince all of the parents that this is the right thing to do.
6. We need our children to be vaccinated. In times of emergency we cannot afford to be liberal or rights minded, or sensitive to parental authority. Coercion should be used – and if necessary the police and military should force parents to have all children vaccinated. Time is of the essence.

Facilitator Tasks

Step 1: Divide the large group into groups of 3-4 participants.

Step 2: Deliver the case and options to participants. Ask them to read the case and decide on one of the above options without speaking to each other.

Step 3: Participants should write the number of their choice on a piece of paper, fold it and put it into the middle of the group.

Step 4: The facilitator should tally how many participants voted for each option.

Step 5: The facilitator allocates each group one of the six positions. Each small group should argue to the larger group that their allocated position is the most ethical.

Step 6: After some discussion, all participants should re-vote and put their choices on a new piece of paper.

Step 7: The facilitator will take another tally. Participants should be encouraged to explain their reasons for changing their minds - if applicable. If so, did arguing from an alternative position change their mind? Were people within other groups persuasive? Were there particularly salient points brought up in discussion that made people change their minds?

Step 8: The facilitator should work through any salient points not raised by the participants.

Discussion Points

The ethical issues involved in this case are as follows:

- Does compelling parents to act undermine their parental authority?
- Does the good of the many outweigh the possible harm done to the few?
- Is there a duty to contribute to public health?
- Can coercion be used in cases of emergency?

Points for discussion extracted from each of the possible options:

1. I am not prepared to tell some parents they have to comply with the vaccination order if it goes against their religious or moral beliefs even though I want my child to be vaccinated.

You are showing respect for varied ethical and personal priorities. Tolerance is also very important in a community. You may, though, also be putting politeness/respect for others' views, or reluctance to engage in conflict, above any concern for your own child or the other children. The ethical issues are identified by the parent but are effectively ignored. This is despite the fact that you know what would be right for your child and for the other children. An ethical decision is not being made because there is no weighing of good vs. bad options. The grounds for making this decision are instead determined by other considerations or personal attitudes. There is also no

consideration of the ethical implication of not contributing to your own child's well being and the good of the group.

2. It is my belief that this vaccination is wrong. I know that I am creating a situation where some who want the vaccination will be denied it. I am very sorry about that but I can't help how I feel.

You have made an argument based on ethical principles. (Whether these ethical principles are accepted by others is not necessarily the point.) An ethical decision is being made here. You are arguing that the decision not to intervene has nothing to do with good of the few vs good of the many. Instead, this is an argument based on an ethical principle that you will not ignore in this vaccination scenario.

3. You just try and make me give that vaccination to my child! This is about parental authority and if I do not want my child to have the vaccine, for whatever reason, I cannot be made to change my mind.

Here you are voting against vaccination. You have prioritized parental authority over any other ethical consideration. You are deciding what is best for your child. Parental authority gives you the right you to decide what is best for your child. This trumps other ethical concerns. You are not, however, showing tolerance to alternative positions. This may ultimately put the health of your child at risk. Equally, you are not considering the greater good of society.

4. My child is very important to me. By agreeing to the vaccination everyone will be protected and the possibility of side effects is minimal. I do not really care about anyone's moral or religious beliefs.

In this position you have decided to vote yes for vaccination. You are not exercising tolerance or respect for others in your community. In your opinion, your right 'to always put your child first as a parent' trumps any other moral concern; in this case including your child in the group benefit is of particular importance. Decisions made by parents trump all other ethical concerns. You will persuade other parents and/or do whatever is necessary to get the outcome you want- even if coercion is necessary.

5. We need our children to be vaccinated. In times of emergency we cannot afford to be liberal or rights minded. We need to convince all of the parents that this is the right thing to do.

Here you are putting the good of society above any cultural or private values and are voting yes to vaccination. You are arguing that health and well being is a fundamental priority. In day-to-day life we may think about how our actions and decisions affect other cultures and people with other values. However, in an emergency situation, where life is at direct risk, respect for individual liberties is secondary to saving lives. Furthermore you are in a position to create consensus by considering ways to convince other parents to vaccinate.

6. We need our children to be vaccinated. In times of emergency we cannot afford to be liberal or rights minded, or sensitive to parental authority. Coercion should be used – and if necessary the police and military should force parents to have all children vaccinated. Time is of the essence.

You are putting the good of society (and indeed the life of your own child) above any cultural or private values. You are voting yes to vaccination. You are arguing that health and well-being is a fundamental priority. In day-to-day life we may think about how our actions and decisions affect other cultures and people with other values. However, in an emergency situation, where life is at direct risk, such sensitivities are secondary to saving lives. Here, you are willing to use coercion if other parents cannot be persuaded to comply. It can be argued that emergency situations allow for the suspension of certain other human rights. It follows from this that our right to life is more important than our right to privacy or religious belief.