

SPPH 381A: Public Health Ethics

Instructor: Daniel Steel

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Course Time and Meeting Place: Mondays & Wednesdays, 1:30pm to 3pm, SPPH B151

Teaching Assistants: TBA

Course Description

This course addresses ethical issues related to health at a population level, its determinants, and interventions undertaken by governments or other social organizations to promote it. The course begins by examining foundational questions about the concept of population and public health itself and moral theories that are relevant to addressing the ethical issues public health interventions raise. It then proceeds to consider the concept of equity in connection with public health. The final third of the course examines several current issues in the domain of public health ethics, such as the ethics of modifying high-risk behaviours (e.g., smoking) and increasing vaccination rates. No prior background is required.

Text (required)

- Stephen Holland, *Public Health Ethics*, 2nd Edition. 2015, Polity Press.
- Links to all other readings are posted on the course website.

Topics Covered

- The concept of public health and its ethical dimensions
- Moral theories relevant to public health: utilitarianism, non-consequentialism, liberalism, and communitarian approaches
- Justice and health inequities
- Specific public health ethics issues including but not limited to: organ donation, environmental determinants of public health, immunization, and HIV testing

Course Objectives

- Gain knowledge of central theories and issues relevant to public health ethics.
- Improve ability to reconstruct complex chains of reasoning.
- Improve ability to connect empirical research on public health to ethical issues.
- Improve ability to write essays that analyze and develop philosophical ideas and arguments in relation to public health issues.

Grades

The grades will be based on class participation, two presentations, and two writing assignments.

- Class Participation (5%): Class participation is based on coming to class prepared to engage in class activities, such as general class discussions, presentations, and group exercises in which you work together with other students to solve a

- problem or examine an argument that is related central concepts for that day. It is expected that students read the chapter or article assigned for the day before coming to class. This is the best way to prepare for class activities, which will connect to major concepts found in the readings.
- Weekly Reading Questions (5% total): A reading question will be posted on the course website for every class except for January 2 (the first class) and April 3 (the last class). Questions will be posted on the course website no later than noon on Friday of the preceding week (e.g., the questions for Week 3 will be posted by noon on January 11). The questions will be in multiple-choice format. Answers to reading questions must be submitted by 10 am of the day of the class. For example, the deadline for answering the reading question for January 14 is 10 am January 14.
 - Two Short Essays (40% total): Each short essay should be between 500 and 1,000 words in length, including references and footnotes, and should be submitted via a drop box on the course website.
 - Short Essay 1 (20%): Short Essay 1 focuses on a target argument that it critiques on some substantive point. You may choose as your target any argument from a reading on the syllabus. The purpose of Short Essay 1 is for you to practice one important aspect of critical thinking, namely, close engagement with reasoning that supports a position that you may not agree with. After an introduction describing the topic of your essay and what it will attempt to accomplish, you should describe the argument that is the focus of your essay, being careful to explain the key concepts and how the argument is relevant to the author's overall purpose. But you should avoid summarizing the entire article—just focus on the parts relevant to the argument you target. Then you should proceed to discuss a criticism of the argument. This challenge will attempt to show either that one or more of its premises is false or that the conclusion would not follow even if all the premises were true (or possibly some combination of these). It is important for you to be clear about just how the criticism connects to the argument. For example, if the criticism is that a premise of the argument is false, make clear which one it is and explain why. If the criticism is that the conclusion would not follow from the premises, then explain how the conclusion could be false even if the premises are true. Please see the Short Essay 1 Guidelines and Grading Rubric on the course website for further details. **Short Essay 1 is due Wednesday, January 30.**
 - Short Essay 2 (20%): In Short Essay 2, you are required to find an article from a peer reviewed journal article that presents some empirical findings related to public health and connect that article to a reading from the syllabus. In your essay, you should: (a) describe the central findings of the article you found, (b) explain how it connects to an ethical issue from a reading assigned in class, and (c) explore the relationship between the article and the ethical issue. Regarding (c), you should try to delve into the connection between the empirical article and the ethical discussion. For instance, suppose your article is about rates of diabetes among aboriginal people, and your ethical issue is health inequities. For the assignment it

would not be adequate merely to point out that your article describes an example of a health inequity. You should also connect the empirical details of the article to ideas in the class reading. For further details, please see the Short Essay 2 Guidelines and Grading Rubric posted on the course website. **Short Essay 2 is due Wednesday, March 13.**

- Class Presentation (15% total): *Prior consultation with me is a required part of the class presentation, and you will not be permitted to give your presentation if you do not meet with me about it beforehand.* Each student will do one class presentation. Students are encouraged to work in groups, with 4 being the maximum group size. Presentations will focus on the readings assigned for that day's class. Presentations can follow one of two formats that parallel either Short Essay 1 or Short Essay 2. Please see the course website for further details regarding the expectations for the content of presentations. Presentations should be relatively brief, lasting about 10 minutes followed by about 5 minutes of Q&A. You should focus on one specific idea or argument from the text, and should not attempt to summarize the entire reading. A sign-up sheet for the presentations will be passed out on the first day of class.
- Final Exam (35%): There will be a cumulative final examination at the end of the semester. The format of the final exam will be multiple choice questions and short essays. The date, time, and room of the exam have not been determined.

Grading Scale:

90-100	A+
85-89	A
80-84	A-
76-79	B+
72-75	B
68-71	B-
64-67	C+
60-63	C
55-59	C-
50-54	D
0-49	F (Fail)

Late Writing Assignment Policy: Marks will be deducted from writing assignments submitted after the due date at a rate of 5% per day.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to Public Health Ethics

- Wednesday, January 2: What is public health ethics? Holland, "Introduction."

Week 2: Central Issues and Concepts in Public Health Ethics

- Monday, January 7: Balancing moral considerations. Childress et al., “Public health ethics: Mapping the terrain.”
- Wednesday, January 9: Concepts of health and public health. Holland, chapter 6.

Week 3: Utilitarianism and Non-Consequentialism

- Monday, January 14: Utilitarianism and its Discontents. Holland, chapter 1.
- Wednesday, January 16: Alternatives to Consequentialism. Holland, chapter 2.

Week 4 Liberalism and Public Health

- Monday, January 21: The liberal challenge to public health interventions. Holland, chapter 3.
- Wednesday, January 23: Public health interventions that increase autonomy. Griffiths and West, “A balanced intervention ladder: Promoting autonomy through public health action.”

Week 5: Communitarianism and Paternalism

- Monday, January 28: Communitarianism and nudges. Holland, chapter 4
- Wednesday, January 30: Organ donation ethics. Saunders, “Opt-Out Organ Donation without Presumptions.” **First Short Essay Due**

Week 6: What are Public Health Inequities?

- Monday, February 4: Social determinants of health and fairness. Daniels, “When are health inequalities unjust?” (Chapter 3 of *Just health: Meeting health needs fairly*, link to e-book posted on course website).
- Wednesday, February 6: Complexities of measuring health inequity: Norheim, “Gini Impact Analysis: Measuring Pure Health Inequity before and after Interventions.”

Week 7: Gender and Health Inequities

- Monday, February 11: Braveman and Gruskin, “Defining equity in health,”
- Wednesday, February 13: A feminist perspective on public health ethics. Rogers, “Feminism and public health ethics.”

Midterm Break: February 18 to 22

Week 8: Justice, Inequities and Aboriginal Health

- Monday, February 25: Decolonization and transitional justice—implications for health equity? Balint et al., “Rethinking transitional justice, redressing indigenous harm: A new conceptual approach.”
- Wednesday, February 27: Incorporating indigenous ethical concepts in health practice. Kotalik and Martin, “Aboriginal health care and bioethics: A reflection on the teaching of the seven grandfathers.”

Week 9: Ethics and Epidemiology

- Monday, March 4: Potential ethical pitfalls of epidemiological research. Holland, chapter 5.
- Wednesday, March 6: Epidemiology and the perils of stigmatization. Katikireddi and Valles, “Coupled ethical–epistemic analysis of public health research and practice: Categorizing variables to improve population health and equity.”

Week 10: Behaviour Modification

- Monday, March 11: Changing behaviour to improve health and the perils of paternalism. Holland, chapter 7.
- Wednesday, March 13: Ethics of the tobacco endgame. Thomas & Gostin, “Tobacco endgame strategies: Challenges in ethics and law,” and Fairchild et al., “The Renormalization of smoking? E-cigarettes and the tobacco “endgame”.”

Second Short Essay Due

Week 11: Public Health and the Opioid Crisis

- Monday, March 18: Harm reduction: attempting to keep people safe and minimize death, disease and injury from high-risk behaviour. Holland, chapter 8.
- Wednesday, March 20: Consent and clinical research on injectable Opioid Agonist Treatment. Steel et al., “Our life depends on this drug: Competence, inequity, and voluntary consent in clinical trials on supervised injectable opioid assisted treatment.”

Week 12: Immunization

- Monday, March 25: Public health ethics and compulsory vaccination. Holland, chapter 9.
- Wednesday, March 27: Vaccine denialism and testimonial injustice. Richardson and Weaver, “Competing epistemic spaces: How social epistemology helps explain and evaluate vaccine denialism.”

Week 13: Screening

- Monday, April 1: The ethics of early detection programs. Holland, chapter 10.
- Wednesday, April 3: Final Exam review.

Final Exam: Time and location TBD.