

SPPH 481b: Public Health Ethics

Instructor: Daniel Steel

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Course Time and Meeting Place:

Course Description

This course addresses ethical issues related to health at a population or community level and interventions undertaken by governments or other social organizations to promote it. The course begins by examining foundational questions about the concept of 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 justice 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 behaviors (e.g., smoking) and social inequalities in relation to obesity. No prior philosophical background is required.

Texts (all required)

- Stephen Holland, *Public Health Ethics*, 2nd Edition. 2015, Polity Press.
- Angus Dawson (ed.), *Public Health Ethics: Key Concepts and Issues in Policy and Practice*. 2011, Cambridge University Press.

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 (10% total): 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.

- Class Presentation (10% total): Each student will do one class presentation. These presentations will consist of describing an argument from the readings for that day and raising an objection to the argument. The objection should attempt to show that the argument is either invalid (i.e., the conclusion doesn't follow even if the premises are granted) or that one of its premises are false. First, you present a written-out form of the argument (with premises and conclusion). The argument can be written on the board, on a handout, or on a power point slide. You should be sure to explain important concepts in the argument, why the conclusion is supposed to follow from the premises, and how the argument is related to the overall point the author is making in the essay. After you have presented the argument and your objections, the floor will be opened for questions from fellow students. These presentations should be relatively brief. You should focus on one specific argument from the text, and should not attempt to summarize the entire reading. It should take you about 5 to 10 minutes to explain the argument and your objection to it. The grade for your presentation will be based upon your ability to identify an argument from the text, to present it in a clear and logical manner, and come up with a good objection. A sign-up sheet for the presentations will be passed out on the first day of class.
- Writing Assignments (80% total): *Prior consultation with me is a required part of each writing assignment, and I will not accept your writing assignment if you do not meet with me about it beforehand.*
 - Two Short Essays (30% total): Each short essay should be between 1,000 and 1,500 words in length, including references and footnotes, and should be submitted via a drop box on the course website.
 - Short Essay 1 (15%): Short Essay 1 focuses on a target argument with which it critiques on some substantive point. You may choose as your target any argument from a reading on the syllabus no later than week 5 (when Short Essay 1 is due). The purpose of Short Essay 1 is for you to practice one important aspect of writing an academic research article, namely, close engagement with reasoning that supports a position that you may not agree with. The structure of each short essay is somewhat similar to that of the presentation described above. 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 some criticism of or challenge to the argument. Typically, a criticism 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). And 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. In your essay, you may agree or disagree with criticism of the argument, depending on your own point of view. If you support the criticism, it is good to try to anticipate responses that a defender of the argument could make, and to answer them. If you think the criticism is mistaken, then you need to explain why. Short Essay 1 is due Thursday, February 4.

- Short Essay 2 (15%): In Short Essay 2, you are required to find an article from a peer reviewed journal article not listed on the syllabus that presents some empirical findings related to public health and connect that article to an ethical issue that was discussed in a class no later than week 9 (when Short Essay 2 is due). In your essay, you should: (a) describe the central findings of the article you found, (b) describe the public health ethics issue to which you think it is relevant, and (c) explore the relationship between the article and the ethical issue in depth. Regarding (c), you should try to delve as deeply as you can 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 theories, arguments, or approaches that we have read about in class on this topic. How does the empirical study connect to these philosophical proposals? For example, does it seem to fit better with some than others, and if so, why? Or do some readings suggest grounds for critiquing the researchers' approach (e.g., on the grounds that it tends to overlook some important issues)? Short Essay 2 is due March 10.
- The Research Essay (50%): Whereas the short essays respond to one argument or data set derived from a single source, the research essay discusses several sources that represent alternative perspectives on a topic. In your essay, you should identify some unresolved problem or question that the contrasting positions you discuss attempt to address, and you should develop an idea intended to advance the discussion on this issue. For example, you might defend one of the positions from criticisms raised by advocates of the other approaches. Or you might suggest a novel solution to the problem that the previous approaches have overlooked. Your research essay can be on any topic discussed in the assigned readings on the syllabus. For the research essay, you are required to cite and discuss

at least three peer-reviewed articles from journals not assigned as readings on the syllabus that are related to the positions that your essay is discussing. (Of course, you should also cite readings assigned in class.) The length of the research essay should be between 2,500 to 5,000 words, including references and footnotes. Please see the grading rubric on the course website for further details about the expectations for this assignment. The research essay should be submitted via a drop box on the course website. The Research Essay is due by 9 AM, Monday, April 18.

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)

Course Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction to Public Health Ethics

- Tuesday, January 5: What is public health ethics? Holland, “Introduction.”
- Thursday, January 7: Does public health ethics demand a reorientation of ethics? Dawson, “Resetting the parameters: Public health as the foundation for public health ethics” (Dawson, chapter 1).

Week 2: What *is* Public Health?

- Tuesday, January 12: It’s a harder question than you might think! Holland, chapter 6.
- Thursday, January 14: What should public health aim for? Brülde, “Health, disease and the goal of public health” (Dawson, chapter 2).

Week 3: Utilitarianism and Non-Consequentialism

- Tuesday, January 19: Utilitarianism and its Discontents. Holland, chapter 1.
- Thursday, January 21: Non-consequentialism. Holland, chapter 2.

Week 4: Liberalism and Public Health

- Tuesday, January 26: The liberal challenge to public health interventions. Holland, chapter 3.
- Thursday, January 28: Quarantines, “social distancing,” and individual liberty. Verweij, “Infectious disease control” (Dawson, chapter 6).

Week 5: Communitarianism and Paternalism

- Tuesday, February 2: Communitarianism and nudges. Holland, chapter 4.
- Thursday, February 4: Organ donation ethics. Saunders, “Normative consent and opt-out organ donation” (posted on course website). **Short Essay 1 Due**

Week 6: Justice and Public Health

- Tuesday, February 9: Fair disbursement of advantages and burdens. Gostin and Powers, “What does social justice require for the public’s health? Public health ethics and policy imperatives” (posted on course website).
- Thursday, February 11: Social/environmental determinants of public health. Wolch, Byrne, and Newell, “Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities ‘just green enough’” (posted on course website).

Midterm Break: February 15 to 19

Week 7: Public Health Inequities

- Tuesday, February 23: The link between colonization of aboriginal people and health inequities. MacDonald and Steenbeek, “The impact of colonization and western assimilation on health and wellbeing of Canadian aboriginal people” (posted on course website).
- Thursday, February 25: Health inequities and critical social justice. Anderson, et al. “Inequities in health and healthcare viewed through the ethical lens of critical social justice: Contextual knowledge for the global priorities ahead” (posted on course website). **Guest Speakers: Joan Anderson and Paddy Rodney**

Week 8: Gender and Public Health Inequities

- Tuesday, March 1: Relationships, gender, and public health. Baylis, Kenny, and Sherwin, “A relational account of public health ethics” (posted on course website).
- Thursday, March 3: How gender and inequality interact with obesity. Wells et al., “Associations of economic and gender inequality with global obesity prevalence: Understanding the female excess” (posted on course website).

Week 9: Ethics and Epidemiology

- Tuesday, March 8: Potential ethical pitfalls of epidemiological research. Holland, chapter 5.
- Thursday, March 10: McMillan, “Public health research ethics: Is non-exploitation the new principle for population-based research ethics?” (Dawson, chapter 10). **Short Essay 2 Due**

Week 10: Behavior Modification

- Tuesday, March 15: The ethics of changing behavior to improve health. Holland, chapter 7.
- Thursday, March 17: The case of taxes and restrictions on smoking. Ashcroft, “Smoking, health and ethics” (Dawson, chapter 5).

Week 11: Harm Reduction

- Tuesday, March 22: Attempting to keep people safe and minimize death, disease and injury from high-risk behavior. Holland, chapter 8. **Guest Speaker: Eugenia Oviedo-Joekes**
- Thursday, March 24: Ethics of medically supervised injection of illegal drugs. Hyshka et al., “Prospects for scaling-up supervised injection facilities in Canada: the role of evidence in legal and political decision-making” (posted on course website).

Week 12: Immunization

- Tuesday, March 29: Public health ethics and compulsory vaccination. Holland, chapter 9.
- Thursday, March 31: Vaccination and justice. Malmqvist et al, “Just implementation of human papillomavirus vaccination” (posted on course website).

Week 13: Screening

- Tuesday, April 5: The ethics of early detection programs. Holland, chapter 10.
- Thursday, April 7: Ethics of perinatal HIV screening. Fields and Kaplan, “Opt-out HIV testing: An ethical analysis of women’s reproductive rights” (posted on course website).

Research Essay Due: 9 AM, Monday, April 18.