Health Emergency and Disaster Risk Management
ETHICS

Key Points

- Ethics focuses on questions of right and wrong conduct, and conceptions of the good life. Differing perspectives can lead to conflicting views on significant issues.

- Ethics upholds widely accepted views on human rights, ethical principles and human dignity, which provide common ground although their practical application is challenging.

- Ethical issues arise throughout emergency and disaster risk management in health and other sectors and are important to address in policies and procedures.

- A key part of ethical decision-making is weighing risks and benefits for individuals and communities.

- Ethical decision-making procedures have the potential to reduce interpersonal tension and conflict, reduce personal stress and distress, and help create and maintain trust.

Example – Haiti (2010)

After the Haiti earthquake, a 38-year-old woman had difficulty breathing due to a chronic heart condition requiring on-going oxygen. Oxygen was scarce and staff decided it should be used only for patients requiring it short-term (e.g. for surgery) rather than for patients needing it long-term. How might this decision be justified ethically? Further ethical analysis is provided by Fink (2010).[1]

Why is this important?

Ethical challenges arise throughout emergency and disaster risk management (EDRM) in health and other sectors. Decisions about priorities in planning and response include ethical aspects, along with pragmatic, economic, political and other considerations. Resource allocation and decisions about what to fund or not fund involve ethical components, particularly views on justice.[2] Responders face various triage decisions, including which communities to help first, which individuals to treat first, and when to withdraw from a locale to provide assistance elsewhere. Policies and agendas of responding agencies can create ethical challenges, such as how coercive public health measures require all members of a community to act in certain ways, whether they want to or not.[3]

Ethics *"is concerned with questions about right versus wrong conduct and what constitutes a good or bad life".*[4] Such questions link closely to how we view and treat others, and how to promote justice in society and institutions. Ethics includes providing justifications for various viewpoints, and examining and (sometimes) resolving conflicts between different positions. Ethics questions are linked to values and beliefs that are deeply rooted in cultural, political, religious and philosophical worldviews. Individual viewpoints within a worldview often vary, as do the ethical commitments of organisations and professional codes of ethics.

Ethical decision-making is based on honest and transparent reflection and discussion with the aim of reaching consensus on how best to proceed. Without such an approach, the underlying bases for disagreements may not be understood, different views may not be respected, and unresolved ethical tensions may lead to further disagreement, reputational risk, and conflict. Ethics aims to make underlying values and beliefs more apparent, so that the reasons for various options become clearer, leading to better decisions and policies.

What are the risks?

- When resources are absent or overwhelmed, health professionals can be pushed to work at the margins of their scope of practice and put patients at risk. Careful ethical reflection during preparation and response can identify risks and develop mitigating strategies

- When responders do not address or resolve ethical issues in the field, "moral distress" can develop with prolonged psychological, relational and professional consequences.[2]

- During crises, the vulnerable and marginalised are at greatest risk. Failure to attend to underlying inequalities and injustices may aggravate matters.

- Differences in values and beliefs can lead to disagreements and conflicts, making trust difficult to develop or sustain. Without trust, all aspects of disaster risk management become more challenging.

Risk management considerations

Widely accepted views on ethics are captured in human rights declarations, international and national ethics guidelines, codes, principles, and the wisdom of many cultures and generations.[5] Standards of ethics and International Health Law remain relevant in disaster risk management, driven by principles like respect for persons, justice, solidarity and cultural sensitivity.[4] These commitments enable ethical responses and promote trust in interactions with affected communities.

Ethical response emphasizes attention to the needs of communities, and promotion of inclusiveness and participatory, rights-based emergency and disaster risk management. This requires sensitivity to and awareness of the capacities and vulnerabilities of affected persons and those with heightened susceptibility to harm and injustice.[3] Those who endure disproportionate levels of suffering may require greater resources.

Ethical action requires that international responders coordinate with local officials as much as possible, ensure adequate preparation, and plan prudent exit strategies in coordination with local stakeholders.

Commitment to generating and disseminating an evidence base for emergency and disaster risk management is part of ethical response.[2] Data should be shared openly and rapidly. Adherence to ethical and scientific principles in disaster research can help protect human rights, and ensure accountability, responsiveness and effective follow up.[6]

Willingness to engage in ethical decision-making processes enables more effective responses and diminishes the negative effects of moral distress, including reducing burn-out and improving trust among responders, officials and affected communities.[7]

Practical mechanisms to address ethical issues in emergency and disaster risk management in health and other sectors include:

- Promote ethics training, e.g. the WHO Training Manual.[5]
- Use ethics decision-making tools, e.g. HHEAT.[7]
- Discuss applicable ethics cases, issues, guidelines and policies within organisations and teams7
- Create safe spaces to talk about ethical issues in the field.
- Develop ethics consultation mechanisms with experts or ethics committees.
- Include ethics when debriefing personnel and evaluating services.
- Ensure community involvement throughout emergency and disaster risk management.
- Advocate transparent, open communication.
- Promoting ethics can help support disaster risk management that is attentive to the needs and values of affected communities, thereby promoting trust and improving practice and outcomes for people at risk of emergencies and disasters.

References

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