THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

RELEVANT ETHICAL ISSUES

Statement by the National Council of Ethics for the Life Sciences, Portugal

Key Considerations

April 2020
THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
RELEVANT ETHICAL ISSUES

THE CNECV'S CONSIDERATIONS:

Attention to the values of life and human dignity

The life of each citizen justifies immediate protective actions in the context of contingency situations, such as emergency and catastrophe, since its value is paramount to other values in need of protection. Special attention should be provided to vulnerable groups which have fewer means, conditions and capacity to self-defence.

The protection of life, dignity and integrity of citizens is an ethical responsibility that involves political authorities at different levels, namely in the preparation of health and sanitary responses, while planning and organising access to healthcare.

Under the light of social justice, responsibility ethics requires citizens to assume behaviours of social restriction and to hold on to preventive measures taken for both their benefit – as an individual good –, the benefit of their immediate fellows and, ultimately for the benefit of humanity – as a common good.

Permanent and continued ethical review of established measures

The present pandemic situation carries a number of individual (disease and death) and social risks (negative effects on the economy, employment, access to essential goods and health care) that justify emergency measures, which together or individually must stand on recognised ethical values.

In emergency situations, measures to be adopted and decisions to implement them must take into account the principle of necessity. They should be appropriate to each moment and specific contexts, bearing effectiveness, proportionality (of resources, means
and purposes) and precaution in respect to their prospective positive impacts. Potential harmful effects should also be constantly evaluated in line with the principle of non-maleficence.

Public health provisions mustn’t disregard the interests and welfare of individual persons, namely the sacrifices they make for the common good, and aim to palliate the negative consequences they have to bear. Measures which imply coercion and intrusion in the personal lives of citizens must be particularly cautioned and proportionate.

It is therefore vital to address features of extrinsic vulnerability both of those diseased and their caregivers which bear new illness and sickness experiences in the isolation of their home, healthcare and nursing facilities. It is an ethical and social necessity to find new ways to support persons in the end of life and those in grieving/mourning processes.

**Ensuring up-to-date, accurate, clear, complete and transparent information**

It is paramount that citizens understand the global dimension and ethical nature of the current social problem of healthcare emergency. The beneficence of decisions should be conveyed as moral ideals and safeguarding both individual and the common goods, including the inevitable limitations introduced to the freedom of citizens, which were part of the exercise of their autonomy.

Actions and different steps taken in the context of healthcare emergencies must be timely and clearly explained and their technical and scientific support should reach all population by the use of an adequate discourse. Only then can trust, awareness and responsibility of citizens be reinforced towards a social commitment to comply to public health strategies (confinement, social distancing, hand hygiene, personal protection).

**Strengthening solidarity**

Public and private institutions, political actors, healthcare professionals, other professionals and general citizens should reinforce their duties of cooperation and solidarity, taken as a commitment to transgenerational responsibility and to promoting the common good.
Political measures of social nature, aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts of the situation of contingency and ensuring the performance of the society in the future, call for both individual and collective responsibility which should be supported in interpersonal solidarity emerging in institutions, communities and in the dialogue between countries.

The vulnerability in emergency situations implies that all actions are guided by values such as solidarity and justice in the present and future developments. Solidarity is a “practice for survival” of our society in the everlasting search for a condition of symmetry and the expectations of reciprocity within a social dialogue.

**Promoting the adequate use of health resources**

Human and material resources needed to implement health measures must be made available by political authorities, given their responsibility to protect the health of each citizen. The use of these resources should be used prudential and accommodate institutional sharing and cooperation seeking to mitigate asymmetries and inequities.

In situations where resources are limited, namely the medical equipment necessary for life support, careful ethical consideration on a base of casuistry should accompany the evaluation of clinical criteria and technical and scientific recommendations issued by health authorities, professional associations and scientific societies. Permanent support by members of local ethics committees could be justified while aiming to help professionals in the ethical validation of their decisions.

**Protecting healthcare professionals**

The activity of healthcare professionals in such a high and continuous demand has considerable physical, psychological and social bearings. The hazards that these professionals endure largely transcend those of contagion and must be considered by creating and implementing specific strategies to address them. Such is a prerequisite to ensure not only the safety of professionals but the peak performance of health institutions and ongoing healthcare of patients in all the stages of their diseases.
**Strengthening Science and scientific research**

Science and scientists play an essential role in healthcare emergencies caused by pandemic infections either by producing the underpinning knowledge for correct policy making (e.g. characterising the biology of the infectious agent or producing epidemiological models) or by further controlling and preventing diseases while searching for new treatments and vaccines.

Dialogue and cooperation, not only between groups of researchers but also between countries, are particularly important for a faster and better understanding of the biology of the agent, for predicting the behaviour of citizens and communities during restraint and mitigation phases and for the development of diagnostic techniques and strategies towards a cure and/or prevention.

Solidary sharing of methodologies and results as well as joint decision making towards accelerating the approval of drugs and vaccines seem to be ethical imperatives.

**Affirming values of social justice and equity**

The response to the current public health emergency has repercussions in other areas that also require careful ethical consideration.

Healthcare for persons with other acute / emergent and chronic diseases should not be neglected at a time when healthcare institutions are mostly mobilized to address and contain the specifics of the pandemic outbreak. Iniquitous situations in the access to healthcare diagnosis and treatment should therefore be prevented.

Rationing of essential goods and healthcare resources may be ethically and socially justified if logistic chains of production and distribution are interrupted or disrupted. The principles of equity, necessity and proportionality are recommended in all situations where there is need to reallocate goods to individuals and families.

The risk of an ensuing social crisis and the loss of income of citizens might impact the access healthcare resources. In order to alleviate such conditions of increased vulnerability, political decisions should involve the whole of society and appeal to values of justice, solidarity and cooperation.
National Council of Ethics for the Life Sciences
Portugal

President
Jorge Soares

Executive Secretary
Cíntia Águas