Chapter 1
What Is the "Public Good" in a Pandemic? Who Decides?
Policy Makers and the Need for Leadership in Society's Perception of Medical Information

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ABSTRACT

Governments in liberal democracies, such as the U.S. and in Europe, derive their authority from the consent of the people and exist for the "public good." This chapter explores the proper role of government in communicating information and in enacting public health measures to prevent the spread of infection during a pandemic. This chapter includes historical context and exemplars of government policy makers' dissemination of COVID-19 health information, both accurate and inaccurate ones. Government officials have a responsibility to promote and support public policy initiatives that balance public safety with individual rights and self-determination. In some cases, citizens did not trust the government initiatives nor the associated misinformation or lockdowns. People reacted by exercising their right to protest. This chapter highlights government actions that were not based on accurate information and contributed to its spread and an increase of cyberchondria across the population, demonstrating the public good may not have been well served.

INTRODUCTION

Policy makers and government officials are playing, intentionally or unintentionally, a key role in increased health anxiety across the general population. *Cyberchondria*, a form of health anxiety propelled by technology, has been defined as searching for health-related information online in an excessive or repetitive way that is driven by the need to reduce distress or anxiety about health but instead results in increased anxiety and mistrust (White & Horvitz, 2009).

This chapter provides exemplars that demonstrate the spectrum of dissemination of health-related information in a crisis, from policy makers' valid contributions to the dissemination of COVID-19 health information to the reckless propagation of medical disinformation of COVID-19 safety precautions. Government officials, elected or assigned, have a responsibility to promote and support public policy initiatives that balance public safety with individual rights and respect for self-determination. Social media platforms allow for widespread dissemination of information from personal tweets to online images or videos in which such officials are (or are not), for example, wearing masks and maintaining social distancing.

The pandemic has yielded multiple, diverse examples of pandemic-related government edicts in many nations around the world, all under the purview of being for the public good. However, a review of these actions from a holistic perspective, and the collective impact on COVID-related cyberchondria, has not been conducted. The exemplars in this chapter will demonstrate that the need for informed decision making by policy makers is rooted in leadership. A further leadership challenge focuses on the need to heighten health awareness and, where appropriate, to restrict movement and activate lockdowns. These actions, however, must be delicately balanced to reduce the risk of inducing anxiety and, arguably, subsequent unrest in the general population.

True leadership, defined as exercising the potential to influence a group to the realization of a goal or outcome, can be brought to bear to significantly reduce widespread pandemic-induced cyberchondria (Cambridge University Press, 1995). When authentic leadership is not exercised or abused in a way to promote disinformation or misinformation, particularly online, societal ill effects are conversely achieved. The clearest example is the fear of taking the COVID-19 vaccine due to influential "leaders" promoting the distrust of its effectiveness.

To be true leaders, government officials must demonstrate a deep appreciation of what is the public good, and specifically, what constitutes the public good in a national health crisis. This chapter discusses in detail the definition of public good and its limits. Interestingly, a government decision may be within the bounds of authority, but it may be too restrictive by those impacted, and dissension may erupt, particularly when perceived liberties or constitutional rights are affected. This result was met with protests and appeals of excessive COVID-19 lockdown restriction time periods, amplified at times by social media. The objective of this chapter is to explore the limits, if any, to the public good and discuss the role of leaders in navigating the public good through the lens of legal, policy, and social aspects.

BACKGROUND

Historical Context of the Public Good

What is the public good? History provides context to the term public good, its evolution, and ties to government action or control. For example, the U.S. Constitution, first signed on September 17, 1787, and brought into effect in 1789, reflected the common goals of national defense and a national banking structure, as evidenced later with the establishment of the Department of War and the creation of the U.S. Treasury, respectively. Individuals, early Americans, agreed to give up certain individual rights for the collective common good to be protected and to enjoy the freedom to contract, and in doing so, ceded some individual autonomy. This approach of balancing individual rights with nation-state interests has been a common theme in countries across multiple continents over centuries. This balancing act

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