

Chapter 8

Health Ethics in a Global Context

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ABSTRACT

Health ethics may be seen as the study of the morality of human behavior as such behavior impacts the health of individuals and populations. Narrowly construed, health ethics focuses on traditional moral issues and controversies in biomedical ethics such as abortion and euthanasia, as well as questions about access to healthcare services. But more broadly construed, health ethics includes moral questions about a variety of other social determinants of health and well being, such as lifestyle and nutrition, education and health literacy, access to clean air and water, poverty and economic opportunity, and public policies and programs.

Globalization means the world is now much “smaller” through increased communication, increasing trade and other economic relations among countries, and the reach and influence of multinational corporations. Moral issues in health and healthcare must now be considered in such a global context, rather than just being issues about what happens within the borders of any one country.

Though it sounds like a cliché, it does seem the case that globalization will be both good and bad for the health and well being of people in the world. Through economic development from trade and from the sharing of industrial, scientific, and health information and technologies, globalization offers the world a chance to greatly improve the health of everyone, even those in the poorest countries.

Economic development could improve health by creating or allowing improvements in healthcare services as well improvements in other determinants of health. But societies and corporations must take responsibility to ensure vulnerable populations are protected from exploitation and are able to share in the benefits of globalization. The realization of this kind of vision may require achieving a working agreement on the nature of our obligations of beneficence and distributive justice and answering such questions as whether all people have a moral right to health and well being.

In this chapter we discuss some of the most important moral issues and controversies in health ethics and how globalization widens and complicates their consideration.

INTRODUCTION

Health is the absence of disease, illness, disorder, and impairment, or even further, a state of physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being. Healthcare includes services of prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and other care intended to restore and maintain health. As we understand the term, “health ethics” concerns the morality of healthcare practices and other activities affecting health.

In general, globalization means that the world seems smaller, closer, and with decreased emphasis on national and regional boundaries. Controversy exists about what globalization includes but we take it that the globalization of recent decades comprises several distinct kinds of events or developments. In what might be called “economic globalization” liberalized trade agreements and policies have given rise to increasing foreign investment and industrialization in developing countries, and also the creation of global markets and financial systems. But there have been other types of change. We are now in an “information age” in which the speed and extent of communication worldwide have increased tremendously. Among countries, travel and migration of people (not to mention technology and ideas) have also increased.

Considering health ethics in a global context means taking into account how such changes have affected healthcare and health. The primary aims of our discussion are to increase awareness of the effects of globalization on health and to encour-

age thinking about their moral implications. But considering health ethics in a global context also means one must consider other matters such as the implication of the diversity of views globally about the morality of specific healthcare practices. And questions arise about such issues as whether rich countries have a moral obligation to improve the health of people in poor countries and whether there should be a more global, international approach to tackling health issues. We briefly touch on these issues. A topic we will not treat, though not for lack of interest, is how the discipline of “healthcare ethics” might be handled differently in healthcare institutions in various countries around the world. This and other interesting subjects that might fall under the guise of “health ethics in a global context” are beyond what we can treat here.

One’s view of all such matters may depend partly on the moral framework adopted. It is beyond the scope of our discussion to adequately depict and involve the many moral perspectives available in the major religions and cultures of the world, but we do discuss some common normative moral theories used in health ethics in the West. However, we try not to advocate any particular ideology or stance within normative ethics, political philosophy, or economics. We invite readers to reflect on their own approaches to morality and how their moral perspectives may shape their views on improving health around the world. Companies whose operations have global implications are urged to consider their avowed moral commitments, the impact of their opera-

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