Let Them Eat Cake?
Ethics, Health Policy and The Food Environment
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Introduction

Public health is “what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy” (IOM 1988).

Beginning to understand the multiple determinants, outside of individual choice, that impact health behaviors and health outcomes.

For obesity this has led to further examination into the impact of the food environment on health.

~ How do we measure this impact?

~ How much consideration should be given to them in broad reaching policies that affect health?
Objectives

Introduce how ANEWC can contribute to the science of the social determinants of health.

Address challenges of public health ethics and how they bear on the permissibility of public health interventions

Responsibility and limits of public health when addressing the food environment

Focus on civil liberties and individual autonomy
**Autonomy:** Individual autonomy is an idea that is generally understood to refer to the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces.

**Paternalism:** Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm.
The Role of Public Health in a Comprehensive Approach

Assess the barriers to healthy food that contribute to an unhealthy food environment.

Address the ethical considerations and complications that may arise in the development of policies to address barriers.

Discuss how population wide efforts to assure that all citizens have access to health-promoting environments are not paternalistic, but enhance individual autonomy.
Good Ethics Begin With Good Facts
Assessing Barriers in the Food Environment

Assessing the Nutrition Environment in Wisconsin Communities (ANEWC)

- A community-academic partnership
- Data collected in same communities as Survey of the Health of Wisconsin (SHOW).
- Document the strength and weaknesses of the WI nutrition environment.
- Examine the association between the nutrition environment and individual health outcomes
- Determine the feasibility and effectiveness of a restaurant and store intervention.
Framework For Understanding Key Determinants of Diet

An ecological framework depicting the multiple influences on what people eat.
Methods

- Outlets within buffer identified, enumerated, and mapped.
  - Reasonable distance to access healthy food
    - 2 mi for urban
    - 5 mi for rural
- NEMS survey completed for every outlet.
- Facilitators and barriers to healthy eating
- Looking at price, promotion, sinage, etc.
What is Public Health Ethics?

- A systematic approach to balancing competing interests and providing justification for public health policies and decisions.
  - Often individual rights of autonomy and privacy v. community interests and responsibilities

- “Public health law provides authority to place significant restrictions on individuals; the law describes what public health can do, Public Health Ethics helps in determining what public health should do.”
  - Alan Melnick, PHLS & Clackamas County (Oregon) Public Health Officer
Ethical Theories and Values

Public Health Ethics entails multiple ethical theories and values:

- **Consequentialism**
  - The consequences of an action are the basis for the moral judgment of the action

- **Deontology**
  - Judges the morality of an action based on its adherence to rules, rights, duties, or other intrinsic moral features

- **Utilitarianism**
  - The moral worth of an act is determined by its ability to maximize utility (happiness)

- **Egalitarianism**
  - Belief that favors equality; fair procedure and distribution of benefits and burdens
Challenges of Public Health Ethics

Public health has four characteristics that provide much of the subject matter for public health ethics:

(1) it is a public or collective good;
(2) its promotion involves a particular focus on prevention;
(3) its promotion often entails government action;
(4) it involves an intrinsic outcome-orientation.
Justifying Public Health Policies

“People may very well choose to trade off years of their life, or the possibility of disease, in exchange for the current pleasure, excitement or stress relief they get from food. It is not for the government to say that is not a legitimate trade off to make. [We] need to question the idea that just because something implicates health that government intervention is justified” (Sullum, 2005).

Concerns that policies may extend beyond the natural boundaries of public health and limit individual autonomy

To what extent can – or should we – legislate people’s choices and behavior?
Individual Autonomy and Overreaching

Issue of choices and trade offs or constraints to choice?

Identifying and eliminating patterns of systematic disadvantage that undermine the well-being of people whose prospects are so limited that their food choices are not even remotely like those of others

Address root causes of ill health and the economic, political, and organizational constraints to food choice

Provide a counterweight to the prevailing political view of health as primarily a private matter
Individual Autonomy and Overreaching

Not intended to limit choices, but increase the number (and type) of choices that are available

Promote and enhance individual autonomy

Recognize the complex interweaving of the multiple dimensions of human welfare
Conclusion/Future Steps

Understanding alternative ethical arguments has become as important as knowing the advantages and disadvantages of different epidemiological techniques (Roberts & Reich, 2002).

Public health should achieve community health in a way that respects the rights of individuals in the community.

Public health should advocate for or work for the empowerment of, disenfranchised community members, ensuring that the basic resources and conditions necessary for health are accessible to all people in the community.

Public health programs and policies should be implemented in a manner that most enhances the physical and social environment.

Continue to keep ethical analysis part of the policy process.
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Questions?