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Don't Assume Health Policy is Based on Principles-Assure it is Always Based on Principles

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Perspective

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Abstract

Milbank Quarterly [1,2] and many others have raised the issue for our consideration, currently public health and our healthcare system are at serious risk. I believe behind this risk is an absence of ethics and principles in the decision-making processes. Further, we must reintroduce principles and ethics to these processes soon or continue to risk permanent damage to public health (across systems) and healthcare (clinical care broadly defined). This direction is damaging our health, wellbeing and longevity. See my further discussion below for additional details.

Keywords: Public Health; Healthcare System; Ethics; Clinical Care; Decision-Making Processes

Introduction

Professions associated with health and human services all have principles and ethical standards that drive policy development and decision making. I chose to pursue doctoral studies in Bioethics, so for my professional focus there are an established set of principles that drive these processes. It is incumbent on all professions to educate their members in the importance and implications of their principles and ethical standards. I'll use this frame to illustrate my points [3].

It is further essential that policymakers (elected and appointed officials responsible for policies) understand what impacts our health, our ability to stay healthy, our capacity to prevent illness and disease, live a long and healthy life and what their choices mean for others.

Reviewing the Current Status and Implications

We need to recognize the value of all the professions focused on health and wellness working together with similar goals and collaborative approaches, and the responsibility of policymakers to understand these actions. This will all be a smoother and more efficient process if we share basic principles to motivate us. All this we need to approach respecting the values of our founders like "All are created Equal"; "Liberty and Justice for All" and the principles referenced above including [4]:

- Autonomy (fully informed decision making for ourselves and those we serve);
- Beneficence (always begin with intention for good for all);
- Non-maleficence (avoidance of harm, "first do no harm");

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• Justice (requiring fairness for all). This involves all the engaged and related professions, many of which already profess to adopt these or similar principles.

First let us review what these don't mean. Autonomy refers to people making decisions for themselves – after being fully informed of the likely and possible implications for an action, medication, intervention, etc. This excludes those who would have us offer the right to "whatever I want or want to exclude – regardless of the facts".

Beneficence means intending good for the individual, group, or community (all). This doesn't mean offering individuals care and services that they can afford to pay for regardless of the implications for others.

Non-maleficence means avoiding harm when possible – again for individuals, groups and communities.

Justice means implementing these all with an eye towards fairness for all, especially with an eye toward those who lack independent means etc.

Policymakers could benefit from observing and appreciating the value of prevention in health. Evidenced-based strategies such as; immunizations, cancer screening and early detection, public education and risk reduction such as; avoiding tobacco, healthy eating, regular physical activity and access to regular healthcare services (periodic assessments, well and sick visits, and related care) all can contribute to healthier and longer lives for our population [5,6]. My Review on this topic in 2024 is a reminder that we have continued in many ways on a path to a more limited, more expensive, and less accessible system overall.

Fact and Fiction

A long list of actions by the current administration has already had devastating impacts on public health and the healthcare system. We're seeing measles (a vaccine preventable disease) at a 35-year high due in part to lack of support for and misinformation about the vaccine [7,8]. A Report by Sen. Wyden of the US Senate Committee on Finance indicates "Trumpcare is threatening Americans' health care in every community across the country," Wyden said. "Thanks to Trump and Republicans in Congress, hospitals will be forced to close their doors, medical providers will lose their jobs, and patients will face skyrocketing health care costs. Instead of improving our health care system, Republicans would rather force a shutdown and burn it to the ground. I'm working around the clock to undo these devastating cuts to Medicaid and save middle-class tax credits for health care so that all families can get the care they need."

The same officials calling for those reductions in support in healthcare and public health, and most recently reducing the prescription subsidy for those on Medicare [9], are actively supporting the War in Iran, Tax Breaks for the wealthy, and other Administration priorities [10]. All this while hitting an all-time record for the National Debt [11].

My use of the heading "Fact and Fiction" is called for as we cannot have a declining quality of life and health, declining access to healthcare, declining respect for established knowledge in public health, emergency needs for appropriations for war and tax breaks for the wealthy, and a majority of policymakers who claim to care about the people they serve. I know I'm dating myself but - This does not compute!

Back to Basics

I propose we ask policymakers of every stripe when they propose or support a program, appropriation, policy change or other impactful measure the following questions:

How does this assure that we are all educated about all the implications and potential impacts to guarantee we can exercise autonomy?
What about this increases the good available to all? What about this is intended to better those at most risk among us?
What about this actively prevents harm, now and in the future?
What about this proposal shows clearly that it is fair for all and justice will be served.

Lastly, we need to remember that most sets of ethical principles and related professions encourage and highlight action for good as a priority.

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