

Public Health Ethics and Practice

S. Peckham and A. Hann (eds.), Bristol: The Policy Press, 2010, xii + 224 pp., £16.49 (pb)

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The past two or so decades has seen significant energy and, at least in North America and the European Union, resources invested into building public health ethics scholarship. This has produced a large body of analytic and empirical literature on this theme, new journals and theme issues (in bioethics, philosophy, medicine, and health), devoted conferences and other symposia; and a host of other 'applied' ethics materials for use in public health research, policy and practice areas (e.g. curricula, case studies, and a public health code of ethics).

We have also seen a number of edited collections and monographs emerge on the topic of public health ethics. *Public Health Ethics and Practice* (2010) edited by Stephen Peckham and Alison Hann is particularly noteworthy. Unlike some of the other books published on this theme in recent times, Peckham and Hann's edited collection is a reader-friendly resource with a clear practical focus.

Public Health Ethics and Practice is based on a 2007 UK conference on this theme. Part one covers public health contexts to define some key concepts and set the scene for the chapters that follow. This section serves as a useful prompt to consider the dilemmas and questions of theory and practice that are at this stage unresolved in this area (e.g. competing individual versus community interests).

Part two concerns ethics and public health practice, and contains eight chapters covering disease, smoking prevention, blood testing, obesity, immunisation and vaccination issues. Part three focuses on public health ethics as a basis for practice, and aims to bring theory and practice considerations together.

The goal of *Public Health Ethics and Practice* is to develop the public health ethics field by exploring it from within the health practice and policy context. This is a welcome advance in the public health ethics domain, and this 2010 collection contains some insights that would indeed be useful if they could find their way into mainstream public health.

For example, Peckham and Hann remind us that:

1. The evidence on which public health decisions are based is not value neutral and incontestable, and derives from a variety of sources.
2. The way public health problems are defined and addressed is influenced by cultural and social norms.
3. Public health ethics must ultimately consider practical or applied issues such as policy implementation and outcomes.

They also point out that "*the way we, as a society, view public health problems, individual liberty, community relationships and the role of*

government continues to change" (p. 212). The diverse and fluid nature of the public health field is a recurrent theme.

Angus Dawson's chapter in *Public Health Ethics and Practice* on the relationship between theory and practice in public health ethics is a standout, and contributes some important observations. He describes the distinction between the purpose of theories, frameworks and models; and offers an interesting critique of the often-assumed tension in public health ethics between individual versus community interests. This chapter should be required reading for public health practitioners regardless of the domain in which they work.

What Dawson is less clear on is what the limits of public health interventions should be when there is a tension between individual and collective interests (e.g. in the case of public smoking and alcohol licensing regulations), or when people make health choices or exhibit behaviours that are contested in public health (e.g. intoxicated, addicted or over-consumptive, at-risk, non-compliant).

As can sometimes be the case with edited collections, there is an absence of a strong and coherent voice connecting the ideas in *Public Health Ethics and Practice*. This is fine for the initial scoping of ideas and possible perspectives in an emerging area. We might even excuse this as consistent with the multi-faceted nature of the public health field, and the complexity of ethical dilemmas that arise here – pluralism is popular in public health. However, with the public health ethics focused literature dating back to at least the mid 1990s, this field is arguably old enough for us to expect more.

In *Public Health Ethics and Practice* we see the diverse perspectives, analytic frameworks and approaches that are possible, rather than a grand theory or philosophy of public health. This suits the diversity of disciplines and approaches in public health. However, it also raises the question of whether or not the public health ethics project is too wide in scope, possible approaches, and required skill sets, as to put it beyond the capabilities, career opportunities, and interests of most public health academics and professionals.

For students or those current public health professionals wanting to learn about the area of public health ethics, *Public Health Ethics and Practice* is an excellent place to begin. The recent developments in the public health ethics specialty area serve to remind us that we must acknowledge the tensions that exist between what can be done (the technical) and what should be done (the ethical). The question of how to justify public health interventions (regardless of whether these are in policy, research or practice) goes beyond merely technical and evidentiary considerations.

Public Health Ethics and Practice would be a worthwhile book for those interested in the normative dilemmas that arise in public health, and anyone open to the possibility that the process of developing solutions to these need not rely only on science, evidence and technical expertise. This valuable collection is easy to recommend.