

Key Ethical Issues Related to Vaccinations

Second only to the development of clean water and sewage systems, vaccines have been a major force in reducing the occurrence of infectious diseases worldwide. Universal vaccination programs have eliminated smallpox and reduced serious diseases including measles, mumps, rotavirus, and polio. However, many ethical issues surround the development and use of vaccines. These issues include (1) requiring vaccination by law; (2) the development and testing of vaccines; (3) informed consent about the benefits and risks of vaccination; and (4) the equitable distribution of vaccines. The following questions relate to each category of ethical considerations.

(1) Personal choice vs. the greater public good

- What is the balance between personal choice and protection of at risk members in population?
- Is it appropriate to legally mandate vaccinations during public health emergencies and for school entry?
- Should exemptions to legally mandated vaccinations be allowed for medical conditions that make vaccination unadvisable?
- Should exemptions to legally mandated vaccinations be allowed based on religious and personal beliefs?

(2) Research and testing

- Who should be responsible for the design and development of vaccines, e.g. government, academic institutions, pharmaceutical companies?
- To be licensed, vaccines go through many years of research, and must pass rigorous safety and efficacy standards. Who should conduct these studies?
- Vaccine testing must include a control group that does not get the test vaccine. Should control groups be included when the vaccine being tested can potentially prevent a serious, untreatable, or fatal infection?
- Should testing for vaccine safety and efficacy be carried out in vulnerable populations, such as children, prisoners, or individuals who are not capable of making their own decisions?
- When testing vaccines in developing countries, should treatment be provided if diseases are detected? How involved should local communities be in the research design process?

(3) Informed Consent

- Should informed consent relating to the benefits and risks of vaccines be required prior to vaccination?
- Who should be involved in providing consent prior to vaccination, e.g. parents, guardians, children above a certain age?

(4) Access Issues

- Should regulations exist that ensure equal access to vaccines for all socioeconomic, ethnic, and minority groups in a population?
- When vaccines are in short supply, who should decide which groups should be protected, and who must be left vulnerable to disease?
- How can vaccinations be ensured for low-income children and those without health insurance?
- How can vaccinations be ensured for low-income, racial, and ethnic minority adults?
- Developing countries face threats from disabling and deadly infections, called “poverty diseases,” such as hookworm and leprosy, not found in the United States. How should decisions be made as to which health needs to address, and how to incorporate vaccination into often-scarce services?

Adapted from <http://www.historyofvaccines.org/content/articles/ethical-issues-and-vaccines>