

Ethics in influenza pandemic planning

by Eva Benelli & Alessandra Craus

Zadig S.r.l (www.zadig.it)

Abstract

This work evaluates the relevance and the application of ethical principles in the development of national pandemic plans. A semantic analysis on ethical issues was conducted of eleven national influenza pandemic plans (10 from European Union (EU) member states (MS) and one from Switzerland), including EU and WHO documents.

The semantic analysis showed a lack of discussion on ethical issues in most European pandemic plans. This work may encourage the discussion on the necessity to update all national influenza pandemic plans in order to include ethical issues.

1. Introduction

Influenza pandemics are unpredictable but recurring events that can have severe consequences on human health and socio-economic life to global level. For this reason, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended all countries to prepare a pandemic influenza plan and to keep them constantly updated, following its own guidelines [1].

The WHO guidance – revised in 2009 to help policymakers to balance individual and community interests when dealing with national influenza preparedness plans – stresses the importance of ethical principles such as equity, utility/efficiency, liberty, reciprocity and solidarity. Any measure that limits the individual rights and civil liberties (such as isolation and quarantine) must be necessary, reasonable, proportional, equitable, not discriminatory, and not in violation of the national and international laws.

For such purposes, WHO has developed a framework of detailed ethical considerations, in order to ensure that overall concerns (such as protecting human rights and the special needs of

vulnerable and minority groups) are addressed in pandemic influenza planning and response [2]. In 2008, WHO published another document aimed at providing a more comprehensive analysis of the ethical and policy issues [3], and emphasizing that every public health interventions must be implemented within the context of internationally recognized human rights, according to the Siracusa Principles [4].

WHO has highlighted that guidelines included in these documents should be used from all countries to develop or update national influenza preparedness and response plans, in conjunction with the WHO checklist for influenza preparedness planning published by WHO in 2005 [5].

Experts from the ASSET project conducted a study on this issue, performing a semantic analysis of national pandemic plans developed by ten European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA) countries (Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom) and one by Switzerland, member of European Free Trade Association (EFTA), including EU

and WHO documents [6]. All documents were accessed through the ECDC official website, whenever a translation in English was available [7].

2. Methodology

The semantic analysis was based on two keyword lists: in a first, generic list, keywords represent areas of possible ethical interest; in a second, more specific list, keywords are more precisely related to ethical issues actually addressed in each one of the national plans.

Aim of the research was to assess and compare the occurrence rates of each keyword within both lists, in order to evaluate the relevance of ethical issues and the application of ethical principles in the development of national preparedness and response plans.

The results of the semantic analysis are shown through data visualizations that allow to describe a complex theme and to share it easily on the web in graphics [6].

3. Results

ASSET analysis shows that ethical issues have not been addressed in most national influenza pandemic plans. They are mentioned in some, like in the Italian and Spanish, while ethical concerns have been discussed more extensively in the French, English, Swiss and Czech pandemic plans. However, only UK, France and Switzerland dedicated a specific section – also included in the index – to ethical questions as regards the management of an influenza pandemic.

In all national plans examined, there are issues which are considered ethical. For instance, in the list of keywords generically connected to ethics, the words *isolation* and *quarantine* are mentioned in all documents examined,

but mostly as measures aimed at limiting the spread of the disease. However, only some of the plans consider the ethical implications of these measures which limit personal freedom, such as the necessity of a transparent communication and the respect of personal needs and human rights.

Similarly, the word *borders* would also require ethical consideration, especially when a document states that an individual coming from a country at risk should be subjected to screening, facing, for example, the risk of stigma. Although the particular human rights may be limited in exceptional circumstances, the focus on the dignity of the human being must always be a priority [6].

4. Discussion

The semantic analysis of a number of national influenza pandemic management plans in Europe showed little concern for ethical aspects and a lack of true discussion of ethical issues in most with the exception of the UK, French, Swiss and Czech plans [6].

The relative abundance of national guidelines, international policy documents, technical reports and scientific papers that discuss fundamental rights issues and different types of ethical considerations in pandemic preparedness and response reveals the importance and the need to place those issues in the right context and the right proportions.

Beyond WHO guidelines and documents, the CDC has also developed ethical guidelines in 2007, as a foundation for decision making in preparing for and responding to pandemic influenza. In these, the Ethics Subcommittee in a first section addresses general ethical considerations and in a second section

deals with particular ethical issues in pandemic influenza planning such as social distancing and restrictions on personal freedom procedures [8].

The Forum on Microbial Threats of the US Institute of Medicine (IOM) in 2007 has prepared a workshop summary on Ethical and Legal Considerations in Mitigating Pandemic Disease, highlighting that many of the proposed disease mitigation strategies may have unintended – and often undesirable – consequences, such as adverse economic effects or the restriction of civil rights and civil liberties. Through this meeting, participants explored lessons learned from past pandemics, identified barriers to equitable and effective responses to future pandemics, and examined opportunities to overcome these obstacles through research, policy, legislation, communication, and community engagement [9].

On April 2015 in the framework of the EU co-funded project ASSET, experts published an *Ethics, law and fundamental rights report*, for contributing to the accomplishment of a major objective of the ASSET project, which is the establishment of baseline knowledge on Science-in-Society related issues about pandemics. This report identified and drew attention to the various ethical, legal and fundamental rights implications in situations of public health emergencies, such as epidemics or pandemics.

Ethical considerations should not be seen as part of a problem, but rather as part of a solution with shared values for both individuals and key stakeholder groups within society. Policy and decision makers should take into account ethical considerations to inform and colour all aspects of pandemic planning for preparedness and response. More importantly, national governments and local authorities

should strive to cultivate a “culture of ethics” across the entire spectrum of societal actors and stakeholders who are likely to be involved – and make or act upon decisions – at different phases of a pandemic [10].

But despite awareness of the relevance of ethical issues, they are still underestimated in national influenza pandemic plans. In fact, our study shows that some of them, like the Italian and Spanish plans, just mentioned them while other MS plans discussed them in more details.

Only 4 national plans (United Kingdom, France, Switzerland and Czech Republic) among those available in English on the ECDC website, have a dedicated section to this topic, including ethical issues among the main principles of a pandemic management plan. This is even more relevant since the analysis revealed multiple areas of possible ethical interest within the different plans, as data visualisations have clearly demonstrated.

This analysis has some limitations, such as the inability to examine all EU/EEA MS national pandemic plans as they were not all available in English and the fact that not all pandemic plans examined are updated in accordance with WHO guidelines revised in 2009. Also, this semantic analysis has used some keywords that are not always matching with the context in which they may occur in the documents examined.

Despite these limitations, however, this work may represent a useful tool to guide future development of influenza pandemic plans. Exceptional circumstances such as public health emergencies in case of epidemics and pandemics must not provide a reason for planners and policy makers to ignore fundamental human rights and ethical issues that can arise at different phases of a pandemic. It aims at

encouraging discussion on the necessity to update all national pandemic plans in order to properly address ethical and other SiS issues, such as gender and participatory governance, which have also proved to be of great relevance in case of epidemics and pandemics [6].

References

1. World Health Organisation. Pandemic influenza preparedness and response: a WHO guidance document; 2009.
2. World Health Organisation. Ethical considerations in developing a public health response to pandemic influenza; 2007.
3. World Health Organisation. Addressing ethical issues in pandemic influenza planning - Discussion papers; 2008.
4. Siracusa Principles [Internet]: Human Rights Library (University of Minnesota). [updated 2015 October 10]. Available from: <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instreet/siracusaprinciples.html>
5. World Health Organisation. WHO checklist for influenza pandemic preparedness planning; 2005.
6. ASSET project. Ethical issues in national pandemic influenza plans; 2016. Available from: http://www.asset-scienceinsociety.eu/reports/page_2.html
7. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Influenza pandemic preparedness plans. [updated 2016 August 30]. Available from: http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/health-topics/pandemic_preparedness/national_pandemic_preparedness_plans/Pages/influenza_pandemic_preparedness_plans.aspx
8. US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Ethical Guidelines in Pandemic Influenza. Recommendations of the Ethics Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee to the Director; 2007. Available from: http://www.cdc.gov/od/science/integrity/phethics/panFlu_Ethic_Guidelines.pdf
9. Stanley M. Lemon, Margaret A. Hamburg, P. Frederick Sparling, Eileen R. Choffnes, and Alison Mack, Rapporteurs. Ethical and Legal Considerations in Mitigating Pandemic Disease. Workshop Summary of the Forum on Microbial Threats, Institute of Medicine, the National Academy Press, 2007. Available from: <http://www.asset-scienceinsociety.eu/resources/scientific-literature/ethical-and-legal-considerations-mitigating-pandemic-disease>
10. ASSET project. Ethics, law and fundamental rights; 2016. Available from: http://www.asset-scienceinsociety.eu/sites/default/files/d2.4_ethics_law_and_fundamental_rights_report.pdf