



From the American College of Epidemiology

## Expanding ethics curriculum resources: American College of Epidemiology's syllabus collection project



WayWay M. Hlaing, PhD, MS, MBBS, FACE<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jack L. Saddemi, MPH<sup>a</sup>,  
Kenneth W. Goodman, PhD, FACMI<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Division of Epidemiology and Population Health Sciences, Department of Public Health Sciences, Miller School of Medicine, University of Miami, Don Soffer Clinical Research Center, Miami, FL

<sup>b</sup> Institute for Bioethics and Health Policy, Co-Director, UM Ethics Programs, University of Miami (UM), Miami, FL

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### ABSTRACT

This commentary provides an update on the evolution of the American College of Epidemiology's online and open-source collection of ethics syllabi in epidemiology and public health. Begun in 2011, the syllabus-collection project anticipated the Council on Education for Public Health's accreditation requirement calling for "the development of ethical practice" and identifying a need to "demonstrate our commitment to ethical dealings." The Ethics Committee of the American College of Epidemiology continued the project in 2018 seeking to acquire as many syllabi as possible for the repository; all 180 Council on Education for Public Health-accredited schools and programs were contacted and asked to share syllabi that addressed ethical and related issues. The overarching goal was to support institutions that have not yet introduced ethics into public health and epidemiology curricula. In total, 45 new syllabi were collected in 2018 and collated with the 38 acquired in 2011; 83 syllabi have been compiled from 52 accredited entities. Having a readily available on-line resource to support institutions and faculty seeking to introduce or improve the presentation of ethics in public health and epidemiology curricula is believed to be an important contribution to public health science and pedagogy.

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### Introduction

Four decades have passed since a sentinel recommendation that epidemiologists have access to a written code of ethics [1]. The Society for Epidemiologic Research and the American College of Epidemiology (ACE) advanced efforts to draft such a code in the 1980s and 1990s [2,3], and a formal set of guidelines was adopted by ACE in the new millennium [4,5]. Since the inception of the original ACE ethics guidelines, guiding principle specific to a subspecialty field such as environmental epidemiology has been developed [6]. The ACE Ethics Committee sponsored symposium

sessions annually to address ethical challenges in specialized and/or emerging fields of public health research such as Zika Virus epidemics [7]. These activities [6,7] underscored the importance of ethics in public health and epidemiology. Efforts to survey existing codes in related and cognate fields produced lists of elements to include in comprehensive guidelines [8]—elements simultaneously useful for developing an ethics-and-epidemiology curriculum. It was clear that no mere set of rules and guidelines would be adequate without a robust and isomorphic curriculum.

As a profession and a science, public health has a long history of expecting if not demanding appropriate conduct from practitioners, and disappointment when those expectations were not met. The collective, population-based focus of public health elicits ethical considerations that differ from those in biomedicine and clinical care, where ethics and professionalism have long been required parts of accredited curricula [9]. Graduate programs in public health ought correspondingly to be able to include ethics in an otherwise purely scientific curriculum. In 2002, a proposal was made to accelerate the development of ethics in public health, and public health schools and programs were urged to give priority to ethics in their curricula [10]. The Institute of Medicine

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\* Corresponding author. Division of Epidemiology and Population Health Sciences, Department of Public Health Sciences, Miller School of Medicine, University of Miami, Don Soffer Clinical Research Center (DSCRC – Suite 914), 1120 NW 14th Street (R-669), Miami, FL, 33136. Tel.: 305-243-3693; fax: 305-243-3051.

E-mail address: [whlaing@med.miami.edu](mailto:whlaing@med.miami.edu) (W.M. Hlaing).

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recommended in 2003 that ethics be incorporated as an integral part of graduate public health curricula [11]. A study examining 2010–2011 academic year curricula found 23 of 46 accredited schools of public health required a course in ethics for master's or doctoral degrees [9]; a standalone ethics course was recommended to prepare future public health professionals for practice and research [9].

It had been determined that one reason many programs and schools of public health did not include ethics in their curricula was the difficulty of developing and introducing a new element into an already full curriculum; another was a lack of familiarity or competence in the subject [12]. When ACE reconstituted its ethics committee (formerly the “Ethics and Standards of Practice Committee”), one of us (K.W.G.) initiated the collection of ethics syllabi. The ACE Ethics Committee continues to regard this as an important contribution to the College.

### Ethics committee service

Inspired in part by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) accreditation requirement calling for “the development of ethical practice” and identifying a need to “demonstrate our commitment to ethical dealings,” we contacted 180 CEPH-accredited schools and programs of Public Health [13] in early 2018. We emailed a contact person at each institution to describe the project, note ACE sponsorship, and request a copy of and permission to post any ethics syllabi. Contact persons were deans, administrative assistants, program directors, program coordinators, department chairs, division chiefs, or others who were listed in those roles.

Institutions were also provided with the link to the University of Miami Institute for Bioethics and Health Policy website [14], which hosted the previously collected syllabi.

The e-mail asked each institution to

1. note if it offers a course or courses in ethics and public health and/or epidemiology,
2. mention the inauguration date of the course(s), and
3. share a copy of any syllabus or syllabi and give permission to publish these on the website.

A month later, schools and programs that had not replied to the initial e-mail were sent a reminder letter and asked to reply within two weeks.

Of 180 CEPH-accredited schools or programs contacted in February 2018, 24 (13.33%) responded and shared a relevant syllabus in ethics in public health or epidemiology. Nineteen (10.56%) responded that they did not have an ethics in public health/epidemiology course. Four (2.22%) reported they did not offer a course specific to ethics but that an ethics module or content was otherwise incorporated into the general curriculum. One institution reported the existence of an ethics course but was unwilling to share its syllabus, or say why. Among 24 schools/programs that provided a syllabus, 12 gave an approximate date of inauguration for the course. Inauguration dates ranged from 2000 to 2017. After one month (March 2018), 132 of the schools/programs that had not replied to the initial e-mail were sent a reminder. Of these, 12 shared a syllabus; 10 responded that they did not have an applicable course.

Nine of the 30 schools/programs that participated in 2010, the initial collection year, provided a syllabus again in 2018. Two of the schools that shared syllabi in 2010 have discontinued the courses. Four accredited public health schools/programs provided more than one syllabus. The repository now houses a total of 83 (i.e., 45 new in 2018 and 38 from 2011) exemplars of course offerings in

public health or epidemiology ethics compiled from 52 accredited public health entities.

### Discussion

It is disappointing that 80% of schools/programs did not share a relevant syllabus. In a previous report [9], 50% of public health schools did not require an ethics course. These findings ensemble suggest an unhappy gap between what is expected of public health graduate curricula and what is being offered.

It should be observed there is some debate whether a stand-alone ethics course is the best approach for ethics education [15]. A single course might give students the impression that ethics is a “separable, distinct topic about which one can learn in a 3-credit hour course and is otherwise unrelated to other professional aspects” [15]. In addition, instead of a special course, the coordinated infusion of ethical issues into other standard courses merits additional analysis. It is possible that an ethics component may be incorporated in other PH courses such as epidemiology, biostatistics, toxicology, and research methods. We doubt this is performed widely or systematically.

It is possible our e-mail queries did not reach all appropriate contact persons. Moreover, we cannot rule out that (1) some queries may have been missed or sequestered by institutional e-mail filters, (2) e-mail recipients failed to forward queries to appropriate educators, (3) school/program representatives failed to respond to queries even if their schools/programs actually have stand-alone courses, and/or (4) some schools/programs have incorporated ethics in other courses. In addition, students might have received responsible conduct of research training, as required by the National Institutes of Health, and those queried might somehow have acquired the belief that such a government initiative to reduce general scientific misconduct is adequate for ethics education in epidemiology and public health.

### Service project with teaching implications

We have been collecting ethics syllabi to support institutions that have not yet introduced ethics into their curricula, to guide faculty who wish to develop such course and to inform and perhaps improve both initiatives.

The topics covered in the syllabi received included issues in global health ethics, health and human rights, health law and bioethics, ethics in public health policy development and ethics in population science. Under those headings, issues addressed included human subjects research, surveillance, vaccination, emergency preparedness and response, quarantine, triage, and information management.

We regard the syllabus collection project as a promising acknowledgment of the important role of ethics in public health science. That medicine, nursing, and other allied health professions have recognized the importance of ethics in pre-professional education and in professional practice should motivate public health and epidemiology educators to join them.

Indeed, there is no shortage of pedagogic materials to support such an initiative. All leading professional societies in epidemiology and public health have introduced ethics into their programs and journals; indeed, there is a journal, *Public Health Ethics*, devoted to the topic, and a number of books are available.

We intend to continue to collect syllabi on ethics in public health and epidemiology and make them freely available. The syllabi are available on the University of Miami Institute for Bioethics and Health Policy website [14], which is linked to the ACE's site [16].

## Conclusion

Ethical issues have long arisen in public health practice and in epidemiology. Public health practitioners and epidemiologists must be competent in public health ethics to analyze and address the complex features of public health research, surveillance, practice, and policy [9]. Although ethics guidelines prepared by national organizations assist in institutionalizing ethics as the norm, this alone is not sufficient. Incorporating ethics as a standard for academic curricula will expose students to the moral challenges of public health research and practice, foster critical thinking, and improve their ability to meet challenges of professional life.

In 1978, a year before the ACE was incorporated, it was suggested that “the ethical standards of research practice must be raised, not through reliance on superior ethics among individual researchers but through the institutionalization of standards and norms” [1]. There has been significant progress in this regard, and the contribution of a suite of curricular tools is intended to contribute to it and related initiatives.

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