



# Foundations of Public Health

## Part I: Foundations of the Profession and Science of Public Health

### PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS IN PUBLIC HEALTH

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#### Introduction

There are many definitions of public health, but to state it simply, public health is the constellation of actions that that a society takes to enable people to enjoy good health and remain free of disease. The goal of achieving a healthy society is intrinsically good, since it reduces disease, suffering and misery and enables people to live longer, happier lives. It also promotes conditions that have tangible benefits such as greater productivity and reduced expenditures on medical care. However, while the general goals of public health are morally good, there may be debate about how much money should be directed to public health when there is competition for limited resources by other moral norms of society or whether the costs of a particular public health intervention are not justified by the possible benefits. In addition, other moral norms, such as human rights or freedom of action, may also be in conflict with public health interventions. Moreover, public health's focus on prevention of illness and injuries, requires interventions that are applied to people who have not yet developed these problems, and interventions like vaccination can have adverse consequences. Public health ethics involves the principles that guide us, as a society, in making decisions about public health that conform to our concepts of morality and resolves or minimizes these conflicts.

#### Learning Outcomes

After completing this module, the student will be able to:

- Discuss the philosophical justifications for public health.
- Discuss the essential moral considerations for public health.
- Discuss the justifications for overriding interests such as freedom of action, privacy, and confidentiality in order to achieve public health goals.
- Explain the key questions that should be addressed when analyzing an ethical issue in public health.
- Define the “police power” and discuss the major precedents set by the case of *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*.