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EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE

Exploring the Ethical Dimensions of All-Hazards Public Health Emergency Preparedness in Canada

Dr. Alexa Caturay[1], Prof. Tracey O'Sullivan[2], Prof. Jennifer Gibson[3], Prof. Alison Thompson[3], Dr. Yasmin Khan[4]

1. Queen's University, Kingston, Canada
2. University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada
3. University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada
4. Public Health Ontario, Toronto, Canada

Introduction: With increasing disaster risks from extreme weather, climate change, and emerging infectious diseases, the public health system plays a crucial role in community health protection. The disproportionate impacts of disaster risks demonstrate the need to consider ethics and values in public health emergency preparedness (PHEP) activities. Established PHEP frameworks from many countries do not integrate ethics into operational approaches.

Aim: To explore the ethical dimensions of all-hazards public health emergency preparedness in Canada.

Methods: A qualitative study design was employed to explore key questions relating to PHEP. Six focus groups, using the Structured Interview Matrix (SIM) format, were held across Canada with 130 experts from local, provincial, or federal levels, with an emphasis on local/regional public health. An inductive approach to content analysis was used to develop emergent themes, and iteratively examined based on the literature. This paper presents analyses examining the dimensions of ethics and values that emerged from the focus group discussions.

Results: Thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four themes. The themes highlight the importance of proactive consideration of values in PHEP planning: challenges in balancing competing priorities, the need for transparency around decision-making, and consideration for how emergencies impact both individuals and communities.

Discussion: Lack of consideration for the ethical dimensions of PHEP in operational frameworks can have important implications for communities. If decisions are made ad-hoc during an evolving emergency situation, the ethical implications may increase the risk for some populations, and lead to compromised trust in the PHEP system. The key findings from this study may be useful in influencing PHEP practice and policy to incorporate fairness and values at the core of PHEP to ensure readiness for emergencies with community health impacts.

In What Ways Does Australian Emergency Management Reflect the Criteria of a Profession?

Mr. Dudley Mcardle, Emeritus Professor Francis Archer, Dr. Caroline Spencer
Monash University Disaster Resilience Initiative, Melbourne, Australia

Introduction: The term "profession" to describe the people who carry out emergency management (EM) in Australia continues to gain momentum. Many emergency managers see themselves and are seen by others as professionals, yet little evidence exists to confirm this proposition. Unlike other professions, there is no peak body or overarching organization in Australia to help the diverse group of emergency managers to identify standards of performance and to lobby decision-makers on their behalf.

Aim: This study identifies criteria that define a profession and considers how the emergency management sector in Australia reflects them.

Methods: A literature review and review of established professions informed criteria of what constitutes a profession. Using these criteria, a survey was conducted to identify the demographic profiles of Australian emergency managers, their perception of the criteria of a profession, and their attitudes towards professionalization of their sector. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a representative sample. Ethics approval was obtained.

Results: A set of criteria for an EM context in Australia was created. 859 emergency managers in Australia were surveyed using an online questionnaire. No common profile emerged from the survey in terms of age, gender, background, expertise, skills, or experience. Likewise, no clear career path, no clearly defined standard training, no universal standards of performance, and no statutory certification to qualify an emergency manager as a professional were revealed. Participants variously identified some of the necessary criteria of a profession, but no uniformity emerged.

Discussion: This unique study concludes that the sector is not yet in a position to regard emergency management as a profession. Recommendations suggest steps be taken in the short- and long-term to facilitate the establishment of EM as a profession and identifies further research to inform the journey towards professionalizing the emergency management sector.