

Ethical issues in national pandemic influenza plans

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Within its guidelines for influenza pandemic plans, 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. Experts from the EU Science-in-society funded ASSET project performed a semantic analysis of national pandemic plans published on ECDC website. The analysis was based on two keyword lists: one represent areas of possible ethical interest; a second related to ethical issues actually addressed in each national pandemic plan. Then, the occurrence rate of each keyword was evaluated within both lists. Data are presented in flow graphs of each keyword for each national and sovranational plan. Results show that ethical issues have not been addressed in most national pandemic plans. They are just mentioned in some of them, like in the Italian and Spanish ones, while ethical concerns have been discussed more extensively in Swiss, English, Czech and French pandemic plans. Only Switzerland, UK and France dedicated a specific section – also included in the index – to ethical questions. Nevertheless, in all national pandemic plans examined there are contents which could be related to ethical issues, with different distribution. The words “isolation” and “quarantine” are mentioned in all documents examined, but as measures aimed at limiting the spread of the diseases. Only some 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 and the implications of these factors with regard to their acceptance. Despite this work has some limits, it may represent a useful tool to guide future drafters of pandemic plans.

Key messages:

- Pandemic response national plan should include ethical issues.
- Most of the actual plan from EU countries do not comply with WHO suggested ethical requirements.