

OAHP (8/7/10)

The Place of Trust in Public Health and Public Health Ethics

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Introduction

- Trust and public trust are often cited as necessary requirements for public health activities
- Is this true?
- If so, what role do they play?
- What role ought they play?

Overview

1. Why should PH be interested in trust?
2. What is 'trust' and 'public trust'?
3. How does trust fit with ethical concerns?
4. What factors increase and decrease trust?

1. Why should PH be interested?

- Much PH activity requires trust
- Much PH activity contributes to creating and maintaining trust

- Reduce risks of harm
- Improve environmental conditions
- e.g. restaurant inspections, water quality etc

MMR in UK

- Sudden decline in trust due to media reporting
- Vocal minority
- Consequences for all

- How should policy makers react?
- How should we think of trust in this context?

2. 'Trust' and 'Public Trust'

- Trust is a highly contested concept. Suggest a number of key features:
- Trust is an attitude. It is not cognitive (and so not, at last directly, open to rational persuasion, evidence etc).
- Hence, you cannot just *decide* to trust someone you have previously distrusted

Trust

- Trust is a particular type of social relation
- Essential aspect of human society
- Trust is perhaps the default position

- When distrust arises it tends not to be global
- e.g. I might come to distrust physician x, but still trust physician y. I distrust MMR, but I still eat in restaurants

Trust (2)

- Saying that 'x trusts y' tells us most about x, although we might learn more about why y is trusted from the context and further description.
- Most literature focuses on:
 individual A trusts individual B
but we need to also understand 'public trust'

'Public Trust'

1. Trust in a particular *type* of institution (for example, a *public* institution)
2. A particular kind of aim or intention motivating action, such as holding something in trust *for* the public
3. Trust that is jointly held by the public (as a whole) in an institution

3. How does trust fit with ethical issues?

- If trust is a necessary feature of human interaction – how does it relate to normative issues?
- Is trust a value? Is it a moral notion at all?
- Even if not – it might still be valuable - because of what it helps to maintain and enhance

Trust and ethics

- This suggests that we should not just add it to our list of values in any framework (e.g. equity, solidarity etc)
- If it is not intrinsically valuable – trust is important for what it brings about

4. What increases and decreases trust?

- Many factors are said to influence these factors:
- Presence (or not) of procedural factors
- Nature of institution (public, private)
- Nature of parties involved
- Degree of public participation
- Public understanding/role of media etc

Influences on trust

- Many (or all) of these *could* influence trust
- Some are more plausible than others
- However, cannot be certain which are key influences as empirical evidence is poor
- Often writers prior commitments drive the claims

Back to examples

- Restaurants
- Water
- MMR

Conclusions

- Trust performs an important role in public health
- It is, also, certainly important to PHE
- However, it ought not to just be added to the list of relevant PHE values
- More empirical work needs to be done on what really increases and decreases trust