When global health emergencies strike, how should doctors respond?

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Over the last few years we have seen outbreaks of Ebola, dengue, Zika, measles, influenza and the novel coronavirus first identified in Wuhan, China. These outbreaks continue to increase in frequency, in part, because of global interconnectedness, which allows viruses to travel from one region to another in a matter of hours. How should physicians, health professionals and other sectors address global public health emergencies?

The January issue of the AMA Journal of Ethics® (@JournalofEthics) features numerous perspectives on how health professions should respond to global public health emergencies and gives you an opportunity to earn CME credit.

Articles include:

“How Should Public Health Officials Respond When Important Local Rituals Increase Risk of Contagion?” During one 2014 Ebola epidemic, arrival of “safe burial” teams was often delayed. Some buried their loved ones themselves, which undermined containment efforts.

“How Should Clinicians Integrate Mental Health Into Epidemic Responses?” Culturally appropriate responsiveness to mental illnesses is critical to mitigating local persons’ distrust of international clinicians.

“When Are Vaccine Mandates Appropriate?” Legal approaches to preserving social stability, maintaining trust, supporting therapeutic research opportunities, or diminishing disease severity deserve ethical scrutiny.

“How Should Clinicians Respond to International Public Health Emergencies?” Balancing need for global solidarity against local stakeholders’ safety concerns is one source of tension when trying to mitigate global risk.
Listen and learn

In the journal’s January podcast, Christy Rentmeester, PhD, managing editor of the AMA Journal of Ethics, explains what students and clinicians should know about colonialism and epidemic responses.

David Heymann, MD, is an epidemiologist and professor of infectious disease epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He is also the former head of the Centre on Global Health Security at Chatham House. On the podcast, Dr. Heymann discusses serving in an Ebola containment campaign.

Listen to previous episodes of the podcast, “Ethics Talk,” or subscribe in iTunes or other services.

Submit manuscripts and artwork

The journal is available to everyone for free and its editorial focus is on commentaries and articles that offer practical advice and insights for medical students and physicians. Submit a manuscript for publication. The journal also invites original photographs, graphics, cartoons, drawings and paintings that explore the ethical dimensions of health or health care.

A look ahead

Upcoming issues of the AMA Journal of Ethics will focus on global burden of cancer inequality, as well as organizational influences in health care. Sign up to receive email alerts when new issues are published.