

Reviewer's report

Title: Pandemic influenza preparedness: an ethical framework to guide decision-making

Version: 1 **Date:** 24 January 2006

Reviewer: Ezekiel Emanuel

Reviewer's report:

Review: Alison K. Thompson, Karen Faith, Jennifer L. Givson, Ross E. G. Upshur. Pandemic influenza preparedness: an ethical framework to guide decision-making.

This paper presents the process the authors went through in developing an ethical framework for decision-making concerning an influenza pandemic, a process that came to include several hospitals and other stakeholders, including the Ontario Ministry of Health. They briefly describe the content of their framework, and comment on the scope and robustness of the framework.

As the authors point out, there is currently little literature on ethical issues in pandemic influenza planning. The only contribution this paper makes to that literature is to describe steps taken to develop and integrate their ethical framework with hospital and government pandemic plans and reiterate the importance of certain procedural elements. The content of the framework produced by this process is presented only briefly, and represents the weakest part of the paper.

The framework has two parts, the first describing an ethical decision making process and the second listing substantive ethical values that the authors believe should inform decisions made in a pandemic situation. Table 1, listing elements of an ethical decision-making process, contributes little that is new in this area. The element of Inclusiveness is specially emphasized, but without any justification given for this emphasis in the table or text.

The list of key ethical values that make up the second part of the framework, presented in Table 2, is also insufficiently elaborated and justified. It is not clear whether the order of values in the table is meant to imply a ranking. If so, I would strenuously question whether individual liberty is the highest value in a pandemic situation that might kill 1% of the population and massively disrupt the health care system and economy. The value of "protecting the public from harm" is overly vague, and more consideration should be given to what the goals of a pandemic response ought to be (e.g. saving the most lives or the most life years).

In general, the presentation of the values in the table is often confused: the description of Individual Liberty is framed in terms of proposed limits on restrictions of individual liberty, rather than describing positively what is encompassed by the value; some descriptions explain how a given value should be promoted while others explain how the value will be threatened; the example given for Protection of the Public from Harm is almost identical to the example for Individual Liberty, which is problematic for two very distinct principles.

The goal of presenting the substantive parts of the framework here may be to "generate dialogue" rather than comprehensively defend it, but even for that purpose the framework needs significant further development and clarification.