

Constructing a Healthy Population: Tensions Between Individual Responsibility and State-Based Beneficence

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Introduction

One of the central tensions in public health ethics is between the two key ethical values of respect for autonomy and beneficence. Good health is widely accepted as valuable as it is an intrinsic component of a good life, but perhaps more importantly, health has an instrumental role in allowing us to achieve the goals that we set for ourselves. But whose responsibility is it to ensure health for individuals and populations and what limits should be placed upon the effort and resources dedicated to achieving good health? Governments have a *prima facie* responsibility to protect and promote the health of the population, and have a range of more and less effective tools at their disposal to achieve this. However, state actions aimed at protecting health may be overly prescriptive, paternalistic, or infringe upon personal autonomy in unacceptable ways. On the other hand, an emphasis upon individual responsibility for health ignores the ways that our health reflects our environment, both physical and socio-cultural, and factors that are beyond our control such as our genetic predispositions.

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