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Ethical Principles in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Inventory Management Decisions and Partnerships

Sawsan Saleh Al Saleh¹, Roqaia Ail Salh Bomozah², Layla Ali Saleh Bomozah³, Zakaiah Mohammed Alshehab², Fadhilah Habib Alhamad², Masomah Jaber Al Harash², Ayat Hassan Mohammed Al Huraiz⁴, Amnah Yousef Alshaqaaq⁵, Wadha Yousef Aljamaan⁵, Hussain Sami Alramadhan⁶, Hadi Hamzah Hashim Alawami⁷, Zainab Ali Hassan Alkhunaizi⁸, Aqilah Hamzah Alawami⁹, Ruqyah Jaffar Aljarash¹⁰, Zahra Saleh Al Gowher¹¹

1.ALJOBAIL PRIMERY HEALTH CARE

2.MOH-King fahad hospital Hfouf

3.King Faisal General Hospital in Al-Ahsa

4.Dammam Medical Complex

5. Pharmacist ,King fahad hospital

6.Almutayrifi PHC

7.Dammam health Network, Dental Allied department

8.Dammam Health Network, Rehabilitation Department, Dammam Medical Complex

9.Qatif health network,Rehabilitation Department, Prince Mohammed bin Fahd Hospital & Health centers

10.Taiba health center

11.Alnuzha Primary Healthcare Center

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical importance of ethical decision-making in managing personal protective equipment (PPE) inventories and partnerships. Balancing equitable distribution, resource allocation, and partnerships with ethical principles is essential to ensure fair access and maintain public trust(1). This review explores the ethical principles underlying PPE inventory management, including equity, transparency, accountability, and stewardship. Challenges such as supply chain disruptions, prioritization of healthcare workers, and global disparities are discussed alongside strategies to integrate ethical considerations into PPE management systems.

Introduction

Personal protective equipment (PPE) is a cornerstone of infection prevention and control, particularly during public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic(2). The global surge in demand for PPE during emergencies creates complex challenges in inventory management, resource allocation, and partnerships with manufacturers and distributors. Ethical principles play a vital role in navigating these challenges, ensuring that decisions are equitable, transparent, and justifiable. This review examines the ethical dimensions of PPE inventory management decisions, focusing on equity, transparency, and partnerships, and provides recommendations for integrating these principles into practice.

1. Key Ethical Principles in PPE Inventory Management

• Equity

- ✓ **Fair Distribution:** Equity demands that PPE be allocated fairly among regions, healthcare facilities, and vulnerable populations. Healthcare workers at higher risk of exposure should be prioritized while ensuring resources reach underserved communities (3,4)
- ✓ **Addressing Disparities:** Ethical considerations require special attention to global and regional disparities in access to PPE, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

• Transparency

- ✓ **Open Communication:** Transparent communication about inventory levels, distribution criteria, and decision-making processes fosters trust among stakeholders (5).
- ✓ **Public Involvement:** Engaging the public and healthcare workers in discussions about PPE policies can improve understanding and acceptance of difficult decisions.

• Accountability

- ✓ **Responsibility for Decisions:** Institutions and leaders must take responsibility for inventory management decisions, including prioritization criteria and the handling of shortages .
 - ✓ **Ethical Oversight:** Establishing ethical review committees for PPE allocation decisions can help maintain accountability.
- #### • Stewardship
- ✓ **Efficient Use of Resources:** Ethical stewardship involves using PPE judiciously to maximize its benefit while minimizing waste(6).
 - ✓ **Preparedness:** Institutions have a moral obligation to maintain adequate PPE reserves to prepare for future emergencies.

2. Challenges in Ethical PPE Management

• Supply Chain Disruptions

- ✓ Global supply chain disruptions during crises can lead to shortages, forcing difficult allocation decisions that must be guided by ethical principles.

• Prioritization of Healthcare Workers

- ✓ While healthcare workers are prioritized, ethical dilemmas arise when balancing their needs with those of other essential workers and vulnerable populations.

• Global Disparities

- ✓ High-income countries (HICs) often secure the majority of PPE supplies, leaving LMICs with insufficient resources. Partnerships with global organizations are essential to address these inequities.

• Partnerships and Profit Motives

- ✓ Partnerships with private manufacturers and suppliers must balance ethical considerations with commercial interests, ensuring fair pricing and avoiding exploitation during emergencies.

3. Ethical Strategies for PPE Inventory Management

• Developing Ethical Allocation Frameworks

- ✓ Institutions should create transparent frameworks that outline prioritization criteria, balancing risk, need, and equity.

• Building Resilient Supply Chains

- ✓ Strengthening supply chain infrastructure and diversifying suppliers can reduce the impact of disruptions.

- **Global Collaboration**
 - ✓ International partnerships and initiatives, such as the WHO's PPE stockpile, can help ensure equitable access globally.
- **Engaging Stakeholders**
 - ✓ Involving healthcare workers, policymakers, and the public in decision-making processes can promote trust and acceptance of policies.
- **Preparedness Planning**
 - ✓ Governments and institutions should maintain adequate PPE reserves and conduct regular assessments to improve readiness for future crises.

Conclusion

The ethical management of PPE inventories and partnerships is critical for ensuring equitable access, maintaining public trust, and addressing global disparities. By adhering to principles of equity, transparency, accountability, and stewardship, decision-makers can navigate the challenges of PPE allocation during public health emergencies. Strengthening global collaboration and preparedness efforts will further enhance the ability to manage future crises ethically.

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