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Violence against healthcare: managing ethical challenges

Making difficult decisions is part of the reality of humanitarian work. But this study shows that attacks on healthcare workers and facilities raises new, complex ethical challenges for humanitarian health decision-making.

New organisational approaches could help support humanitarian staff

This project explored the ethical challenges humanitarian health organizations face in situations of violence against civilians, particularly when healthcare facilities are targeted.

The study found that the ethical challenges of decision-making in conflict-affected settings are significant, and there are negative psychological impacts for staff. Improved organisational systems and processes may be needed to address real-world challenges faced. Tools and guidance based on the evidence produced could support humanitarian health actors to better navigate ethical decision-making and support front-line

A destroyed health facility in Aleppo, Syria. Photo by Syrian American Medical Society.

Background

Humanitarian health organizations often face ethical challenges in conducting their operations, caused by a range of limitations which arise when working in challenging and often war-torn settings. In Syria, where the study was conducted, healthcare facilities and workers have been deliberately targeted with violent attacks. Between 2011 and 2018 there were almost 600 documented attacks on Syrian hospitals.

Humanitarian decision making in such settings is extremely difficult. There are often 'no good solutions'. This can also lead to moral distress, affecting staff wellbeing. To respond to this growing problem, the study team explored the ethical challenges organizations and health workers face in situations of extreme violence to identify relevant ethical principles and offer tools to address these challenges.

How the research was conducted

After a literature review, 99 interviews were conducted with managers and front-line health-workers to explore ethical challenges faced by organisations and health workers in Syria. Workshops with stakeholders discussed the findings and potential responses. Existing decisional frameworks were reviewed before producing a report and recommendations.

Key findings

- The most frequently noted ethical challenges for organizations in a literature review were (1) providing high quality of care, (2) protecting workers, and (3) minimizing unintended harms.
- Organizations and front-line health workers face unique ethical challenges, such as whether to rebuild a hospital that has been bombed where the community fears another attack.
- While organisations provide some support from outside Syria, some front-line health workers found they needed more support to navigate ethical decisions.
- Health workers faced significant psychological burdens and distress resulting from working long hours under the strains of these conditions.
- Workshop participants agreed on the need for systematic means of addressing ethical concerns in their organizations, and for organizational structures and processes.to help address real-world challenges.

Implications for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers

The findings indicate that humanitarian actors can better face the challenge of ethical challenges in humanitarian response through whole-of-organizational, systematic approaches.

Recommendations include:

- Commit time and resources to addressing key ethical issues the organization regularly faces. Seek buy-in at all levels.
- Articulate clear ethical and humanitarian principles as a foundation for such changes. These can be linked with ethical and humanitarian principles.
- New organizational structures, systems and processes may be needed to support ethical decision-making.
- Provide regular training and support in ethics to staff and individuals within the organization, including guidance on coping with moral distress.
- Provide support for the mental health and psychosocial needs of staff and other decision-makers supported by the organization. The gender-specific needs of female staff should be recognized.
- Donors should provide support for implementing organisations to put such support in place.

Further guidance, including decision-making tools and frameworks, are provided as outputs from the research study.

Recommendations for future research

Further research could evaluate the experiences of humanitarian organisations working in other countries and settings where humanitarian health facilities are the target of violent conflict, for example Yemen.

It will be important to track whether the recommendations are adopted, how they are implemented, and whether they have a measurable impact on improving ethical decision-making processes by organizations involved in a humanitarian response involving extreme violence.

About the study team

The Principal Investigator was Prof Leonard Rubenstein JD of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Partners in the study were the Johns Hopkins University Berman Institute of Bioethics, the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

Articles and further reading

Further resources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, the report and recommendations and organizational handbook containing further tools and guidance, are accessible on the Elrha website.

https://www.elrha.org/project/ethical-challenges-humanitarian-health-situations-extreme-violence/