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Pharmacy Professional's Duty during an Emergency, Disaster or Pandemic Ethical Framework

(Adapted from the Nova Scotia College of Pharmacists – A Pharmacist's Duty during a Pandemic: an Ethical Framework)

Introduction:

The College of Pharmacists of Manitoba (CPhM) has established the following ethical framework identifying the values for use in consideration of informed decision-making by Manitoba pharmacists during a significant health emergency, such as a pandemic. This ethical framework examines the values that should inform decision-making. Unlike a policy or guideline, it is not prescriptive and represents principles, rather than recommending a course of action. This framework was developed using the ethical values identified in [Stand on Guard for Thee: Ethical Considerations in Preparedness Planning for Pandemic Influenza](#) (Upshur, R. et al. 2005), a report developed by the University of Toronto Joint Centre for Bioethics Pandemic Influenza Working Group.

These guiding principles are intended to inform pharmacy professionals of their responsibility to provide care, along with the values to be implemented in decisions that support and protect healthcare professionals as they deliver patient care under extraordinary circumstances, such as an emergency.

Research shows that many healthcare professionals have reservations, based on personal safety concerns, with reporting to work during an emergency such as a pandemic. Pharmacy professionals who are undecided about how much personal risk they will accept during an emergency, such as a pandemic, must take into account their professional Code of Ethics. The CPhM [Code of Ethics](#) includes Statement VII: "***Pharmacists shall hold the health and safety of each patient to be a primary consideration***" and Statement IX: "***Pharmacists shall respect the rights of patients to receive healthcare***", whereby pharmacists must ensure the continuity of care for patients until it is no longer required, wanted, or until another suitable healthcare professional has assumed responsibility for that care.

Health emergencies represent exceptional situations that impose a serious threat to public health. They require collective efforts and appropriate timely strategies. In these situations,

many of the high-level planning and policy decisions will be made by federal and provincial governments. Decisions regarding the delivery of health care and guidelines for healthcare professionals will be made by organizations such as public health agencies and health authorities. Despite this, pharmacy professionals will need to make many important decisions at an individual level and the time to decide one's professional commitment in the face of threats to personal safety is not during a public health emergency, but before such an emergency occurs.

The report *Stand on Guard for Thee* identifies 10 substantive values that CPhM recommends pharmacists use in guiding decision-making in the event of a health emergency:

- **Individual liberty:** Canadians hold individual liberty as an important principle. Restrictions to individual liberty may be necessary and relevant in protecting the public from serious harm.
- **Protection of the public from harm:** Health organizations and public health authorities may be required to take actions that impinge on individual liberty.
- **Proportionality:** Restrictions to individual liberty and measures taken to protect the public from harm should use the least restrictive means to address the *actual* level of risk to the community and be applied without discrimination.
- **Privacy:** A right to privacy in the disclosure of health care information is central to an individual's rights. Individual's rights to privacy in health care may need to be weighed against the right to protect the public from serious harm. Private information should only be released if there are no less intrusive means to protect the health of the public.
- **Duty to provide care:** This principle is inherent in CPhM's Code of Ethics, which states that a fundamental responsibility of a pharmacist is to hold the health and safety of each patient to be of primary consideration. Pharmacists will be met with significant challenges regarding resource allocation, scope of practice, professional liability, workplace conditions and addressing their personal risk versus their obligation to provide care for patients. This duty is qualified by the obligation of the employer, regulator, and/or public health authority to ensure adequate resources are available to support a safe environment that will minimize short- and long-term risks for the healthcare professional.

- **Reciprocity:** Society must support those who are required to take increased risks or face a disproportionate burden in protecting the public (healthcare professionals), and also take steps to minimize these burdens as much as possible. Social solidarity should flow in both directions. If, in the case of a health emergency, pharmacists have certain obligations towards society, then society has certain reciprocal obligations towards pharmacists. CPhM agrees that the federal and provincial governments and professional advocacy organizations play an important role in supporting this concept.
- **Equity:** As stated in the *Canada Health Act*, “The primary objective of Canadian health policy is to facilitate reasonable access to health services without financial or other barriers”. Due to resource limitations, the onset of a health emergency (such as a pandemic), will impose difficult decision-making regarding which health services will be maintained, and which will be deferred. During a pandemic, decision-makers must attempt to maintain the principle of equity when considering the interests of pandemic affected patients, as well as those requiring treatment for other chronic diseases.
- **Trust:** Trust is an essential component of the relationship between healthcare professionals, patients, staff and their organizations, and the public. Trust must be maintained with all stakeholders through the demonstration of transparency, accountability and ethical processes in all decisions.
- **Solidarity:** This process requires the use of collaborative approaches that set aside traditional values of self-interest or territoriality among healthcare professionals, services or institutions. Solidarity requires that decision-makers and pharmacists support positions arrived at by consensus and uphold them.
- **Stewardship:** Both institutions and individuals will be entrusted with control over scarce resources such as vaccines, antivirals, ventilators, personal protective equipment, hospital beds, and healthcare professionals. Those entrusted with this control are guided by ethical behavior and good decision-making based on evidence and reason that achieves the best patient and public health outcomes.

Obligation to Provide Care and Social Reciprocity

There is an ethical obligation for pharmacy professionals to care for patients, even in the face of personal risk. According to the *Stand on Guard for Thee* report, the duty to care for those in

need is a primary ethical obligation for all healthcare professionals for several reasons, including the following:

- The ability of healthcare workers to provide care is greater than that of the public, thus increasing their obligation.
- By freely choosing a profession devoted to caring for the ill, they assume risks.
- The profession has a social contract that calls on members to be available in times of emergency.

CPhM agrees that pharmacy professionals have a professional and ethical obligation to help others in times of crisis. A pharmacist's decision to not be involved during a health care emergency shifts the burden to others, including fellow pharmacists and other healthcare professionals and their facilities. It also places the public at risk.

Along with the healthcare professional's obligation to provide care during a health emergency, it is the reciprocal obligation of society towards the healthcare professional. Reciprocity plays a key role in the social contract between pharmacy professionals and the public. Appropriate measures and resources must be in place during times of crisis for pharmacy professionals to face risks and provide care to those in need. Societal obligations extend to governments, employers, public health authorities, regional health authorities, and pharmacy advocacy groups, to ensure appropriate resources and policies are in place to support a safe environment.

All pharmacy professionals have the same ethical obligations to provide care during an emergency. There is also an obligation to take any steps required to protect themselves. It is recognized that some pharmacy professionals will have greater needs and challenges than others. There may be personal challenges or vulnerabilities that prevent some pharmacy professionals from assuming the same level of involvement in the provision of care to the public. It is expected that colleagues and employers will recognize and protect/support these pharmacy professionals.

Standards of Care during a Health Emergency

During a healthcare emergency, pharmacy professionals may be presented with an ethical dilemma, where the emergency has overwhelmed healthcare resources. This may require pharmacists to shift their standard of care from one that focuses on individual patients, to one that focuses on what is best for the greatest number of patients.

Allocation of Medications and Stockpiling

The needs of individuals must be balanced against that of the greater good. During a pandemic, pharmacy professionals are expected to continue using their knowledge, skills and professional judgement on an individual patient-basis when considering allocation of medications, which maintains the best interests of the patient and society as a whole. Unless otherwise directed by public health officials, during a pandemic, pharmacy professionals should consider all aspects of care for each patient in determining optimal allocation of medications. This includes ensuring patients are provided appropriate amounts of prescription medications, considering the patient's access to pharmacy services, and potential strains on the national drug supply, which may lead to exacerbating drug shortages.

Pharmacy professionals must be cognizant of the issues associated with stockpiling medications and the consequences to provincial and national drug supply. For recent guidance on issues of stockpiling of medications, please refer [here](#). For recent guidance from the Canadian Pharmacists Association on issues of stockpiling of medications, please refer [here](#).

Conclusion

This ethical framework is intended to assist pharmacy professionals in understanding their professional and ethical responsibilities in the event of a health emergency. It is also intended to guide pharmacy professionals in their decision-making processes during such a crisis.

Pharmacy professionals must consider the 10 substantive values set out in the *Stand on Guard for Thee* report when developing their emergency processes and providing care. Ultimately, pharmacy professionals are free to make necessary independent decisions during the course of a health crisis, but they should be prepared to reasonably justify these decisions, if necessary.

Pharmacy managers must have a plan in place regarding the delivery of health care services during an emergency, disaster or pandemic.

This framework provides direction and substantive values for pharmacy professionals to use in careful consideration of the ethical decisions expected in the face of a health emergency, disaster, or pandemic.