

The Questions

The Global Health Regime

What is the global health regime?

Is a global health regime needed?

Should corporations be allowed to participate in the global health regime?

Can Corporations be Ethical?

Is it ethical for a corporation to have a patent on life saving medicine?

Is it ethical for a corporation to make profits on life saving medicine?

Is the Free Market compatible with Global Health?

What are the positives and negatives of a free market system with regards to global health?

Which is prioritized more in a free market system, profits, or human rights?

Issues in Contemporary Ethics:

Global Health

At a Glance

According to Koplan JP, Bond TC, Merson MH, et al (2009), Global Health is the area of study, research and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide, especially in low income countries. In congruence with this, this brief seeks to explore the global health sector and the ethical dimensions that arise when global health efforts interact with, or are left to, the private sector.



Jason Cone, Executive Director for Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the United States.

Case Study : Doctors Without Borders Refusal of Pfizer's Vaccines

In 2016, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), an international medical NGO, refused a donation of one million vaccine doses from the pharmaceutical corporation Pfizer. Pfizer's donation included inoculations that fought against a fatal form of pneumonia but despite their promise of immediate delivery, Jason Cone, the Executive Director of MSF USA, explained that Pfizer's donation to the NGO was unethical. The organization pointed to the fact that "free" donations like these are often used to make other users that are not recipient of support from Doctors Without Borders pay more. Additionally, the organization decried the profits that company made from the vaccine, citing the inability of less developed countries to purchase them. After refusing the donation, the organization suggested that the company reduce the price of their vaccines, citing examples of other companies, such as GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), which had done so earlier that year, to enable greater access to them.

Implications

The refusal of Pfizer's vaccines meant that a million free doses of a vaccine to counter a leading cause of death in children were unaccepted when they could have played a pivotal role in global health situations around the world. On the other hand, a month after the NGO's refusal of the vaccines, Pfizer announced that there would be a reduction in the price of their vaccines for emergency humanitarian situations. This, however, raises questions about the private sector "owning" essential medicines as intellectual property that are protected by patents. Should companies like Pfizer be able to set any price for products, as a totally free market might suggest? Or, should humanitarian and human rights concerns force governments to regulate profits and costs?

Comparing Perspectives

Ethical theories have been divided into two: rationalist and alternative theories. Examples of rationalist theories include utilitarian, contractualist and discourse ethics. On the other hand, alternative ethical theories include virtue,

Further Reading

Global Health Watch

Global Health Watch 5: An Alternative World Health Report

Caruso Brown, A. E.,
Hobart, T. R., & Morrow, C.
B

Bioethics, Public Health,
and the Social Sciences for
the Medical Professions.

Doctors Without Borders

There is No Such Thing as Free Vaccines': Why MSF Rejected Pfizer's Donation Offer of Pneumonia Vaccines.

World Health Organization,
Médecins Sans Frontières,
Perelman School of
Medicine, University of
Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
Ensuring access to
affordable, timely vaccines
in emergencies

Beaglehole, R., & Bonita, R.
(2010).

What is Global Health?

James Smith

When Free is not Fair: The Case of Vaccine Donations

feminist ethics, and postmodern ethics. In this series of Briefs, one rationalist and one alternative will be explored to present contrasting views on the issues and questions raised.

Contractualism

Contractualism is a theory that states that any actions taken must abide by an implied or actual contract that has been inherently agreed upon by all involved parties. In the case of corporations like Pfizer having a monopoly on essential pharmaceutical products through patents of their intellectual property, a contractualist could argue that because Pfizer is an independent company, they can set any price that they deem reasonable for their products. Additionally, a second argument could entail the fact that the current system is one that has been argued upon by all parties involved. As such, even if the MSF has complaints about how the system works, while they do have the freedom to refuse the vaccines, the implied contract that grants Pfizer intellectual property rights and patents to its vaccines has already been agreed to in a sense, by the MSF.

Feminist Ethics

Feminist Ethics is an alternative theory that examines the way women, children, and the disabled are disenfranchised and oppressed by various institutions. More specifically, feminist ethicists aim to understand, criticize, and correct how different institutions in a society ignore the perspectives of the marginalized, and take them for granted. With regards to MSF's refusal of vaccines, a feminist ethicist could argue that because the vaccines sold by Pfizer typically treat a disease that is a leading killer of children, accruing profits through its sale is unethical and leads to the oppression of children. As such, a feminist ethicist could argue that the rejection of the free vaccines and the subsequent reduction of prices is a specific scenario who led to greater access was an ethically correct decision since it led to a better quality of life for children and the sick, two of the most oppressed categories of people.

Questions for Reflections

Jason Cone's refusal led to the reduction of the cost of vaccines for people in the least medically developed areas while also ignoring the people who would have directly benefitted from the free vaccines, is this a good trade-off and should this be contemplated at all? On a larger scale, do people have the inherent right to access life saving medicine? Should corporations have the right to patent life saving medicine? How can intellectual property continue to be protected without negatively affecting already disenfranchised people? Does capitalism and the protection of patents contribute to the promotion of profits over human life? The free market system is one in which the prices for goods and services are self-regulated by the open market, is such a system feasible when advocating for the prioritizing of human lives over profits?

Koplan, J. P., Bond, T. C., Merson, M. H., Reddy, K. S., Rodriguez, M. H., Sewankambo, N. K., & Wasserheit, J. N. (2009). Towards a common definition of global health. *The Lancet*, 373(9679), 1993–1995. doi: 10.1016/s0140-6736(09)60332-9

Cone, J. (2016, October 10). There is no such thing as "free" vaccines: Why we rejected Pfizer's donation offer of pneumonia... Retrieved from https://medium.com/@MSF_access/there-is-no-such-thing-as-free-vaccines-why-we-rejected-pfizers-donation-offer-of-pneumonia-6a79c9d9f32f#efhbagg0v

Hamblin, J. (2016, October 14). Doctors Refused a Million Free Vaccines—to Make a Statement About the Pharmaceutical Industry. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/10/doctors-with-borders/503786/>

Pneumonia is the leading cause of death in children. (2011, December 16). Retrieved from https://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/news_events/news/2011/pneumonia/en/