



BIOETHICS IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

|OFFICIAL STATEMENT|

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, it constitutes a bioethical imperative to take all necessary measures to prevent harms to the population, especially considering the needs of people in vulnerable conditions –that is, from the population confined to their homes, subject to an outpatient care scheme, to the elderly, or those who live with chronic diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes, COPD, heart disease in general, or immunosuppression, as well as the healthcare professionals themselves–, with interventions based on the available scientific evidence, and with the participation of all sectors of our society.

Bioethics as a framework for action in the face of a pandemic

At a global level, bioethics has positioned itself as an inter- and multidisciplinary enterprise that adopts a comprehensive approach to healthcare, in order to face the tensions and conflicts that derive from the clash of values between cultures, based on the weighing of individual and collective interests, while considering the protection of groups in vulnerable conditions.

In the case of infectious outbreaks we find particular complexities, since decisions in these cases must be made urgently, often in a context of scientific uncertainty and with a general climate of fear and mistrust. For this reason, specific criteria must be established in advance to determine priorities and take action, considering reduced time frames, as well as scarcity of resources, in addition to considering measures to ensure access to treatment for those who need it most.

In this regard, five axes of analysis must be considered in the approach to the COVID-19 pandemic.





1. Planning against uncertainty

Various ethical models have arisen in the past to deal with epidemics and pandemics, depending on the conditions in which the infection occurs, as well as the nature of the risk and characteristics of the vector –as pointed out by the recommendations of the WHO, UNESCO, Hastings Center of the United States and the Nuffield Council for Bioethics in the United Kingdom, among other international bodies–; however, in any case, the participation of society is essential to achieve the proposed objectives.

In a context of epidemiological contingency –especially in the case of a new infectious agent–, it is imperative to support scientific research, as an essential tool to develop the knowledge base that will inform public health interventions and policies, and influence decision-making of public health, in order to provide an immediate response that contributes to preventing diseases, disabilities and deaths, as well as supporting the recovery of the population. Likewise, as established by the provisions of the General Health Council of Mexico, effective and efficient monitoring is required, in order to implement adjustments or corrective measures in a timely manner.

2. Respect for the integrity of persons and protection of groups in vulnerable conditions

Tackling the COVID-19 pandemic necessarily implies a reassessment of our public policies in labor, economic and social matters, considering both the needs of health personnel and those who remain at home in contribution to public health –especially groups in vulnerable conditions.

Policies to contain this outbreak must pay due regard to social vulnerabilities, not in statistical terms, but in relation to the health needs of the population, which currently represent a threat to the capacity of the State. In this regard, the importance of providing access to mental health services for all those in crisis, anxiety or stress from this contingency cannot be overstated.

On the other hand, regarding the overcrowding conditions in which people imprisoned in the penal system live, it is a priority to take additional measures to avoid population contact and contagion.



3. Standards of care during contingencies and epidemiological crises

The protection of public health as the end of the State takes precedence over any other individual guarantee; which would imply, in certain cases,¹ the legitimization of a control intervention –such as the limitation of free transit or the tracking and monitoring of contacts of infected people, among other measures–; however, *respect for people must remain the fundamental parameter in any strategy to contain an epidemiological outbreak.*

For both pragmatic and ethical reasons, it is essential to maintain the confidence of the population in the response to epidemics; however, this is only possible when policymakers and health workers act reliably by applying principles and procedures fairly and consistently, while remaining open to review and taking into account the contributions of affected communities.

In light of this crisis, it cannot be ignored that health care professionals and health workers face a great burden, dealing with complex surroundings and at a constant risk of contracting the infection. In this regard, it is a fundamental requirement to provide all healthcare personnel with the necessary supplies to reduce risk.

4. Innovation and research in health for the timely production of required supplies

To ensure capacity for an immediate response to a pandemic, the allocation of resources constitutes a priority, as a means of promoting research and development of drugs for the benefit of the entire population. In some cases the simplification of regulatory processes and their priority attention has proven useful, in order to speed up the start of a clinical trial to evaluate the safety and efficacy of a new vaccine or medicine, so that it may reach the population in a timely manner –always under the standard of unrestricted respect for the integrity of persons. To this effect, we acknowledge the work of public and national charitable foundations that support health research projects, such as the Carlos Slim Foundation, the Gonzalo Río Arronte

¹ During infectious disease outbreaks, countries must respect their obligations under international human rights agreements, such as the *Syracuse Principles on Limitation and Repeal Provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, an established framework for evaluating the desirability of limiting certain fundamental human rights in emergency situations.





Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation from the United States, as well as the Wellcome Trust from the United Kingdom.²

Among the latest technological developments in health, algorithmic models have been implemented using artificial intelligence to identify health risks in a population, which, however, require constant feeding and systematization of information. In this regard, efficient mechanisms must be established to share medical information among relevant actors, while considering personal data protection standards.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the exchange of information belonging to the areas of basic and clinical sciences, both nationally and internationally, is essential to feed the various Artificial Intelligence systems and thus contribute to the development of interventions to decrease the expansion of this pathology, and accelerate the development of an effective and safe vaccine.

5. Solidarity and coordination of actions with civil society

Considerando que la contención y mitigación del COVID-19 habrá de contar con la participación de toda nuestra sociedad, se requiere integridad en la estrategia de comunicación para asegurar que la población cuente con información de carácter científico sobre la sintomatología y medidas precautorias, no con otra finalidad sino la de informar, educar, recomendar, preparar y prevenir, con perspectiva de género, además de evitar la difusión de información falsa –que sólo genera desconfianza y miedo entre la población.

Los costos incurridos por contener pandemias no son menores; sin embargo, no afectan a los mismos grupos poblacionales de la misma forma, esto exige solidaridad por parte de la sociedad. Para quienes se encuentren en un nivel bajo de riesgo, los costos incurridos por las medidas para contener las pandemias pueden ser demasiado altos; sin embargo, para aquellos con un riesgo relativamente alto, las acciones que les imponen riesgos adicionales (riesgo de perder ingresos u oportunidades debido a la imposibilidad de ir al trabajo o viajar) pueden implicar un costo demasiado alto. En este sentido, el diálogo y el consenso comprenden mecanismos fundamentales para prevenir y mitigar los efectos negativos de la pandemia.

² Cfr. OCDE (2004). *Fundaciones Filantrópicas y Cooperación al Desarrollo*. Massachusetts: OCDE. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/31670558.pdf>





Considering that the containment and mitigation of COVID-19 will involve the participation of our entire society, a communication strategy with the highest standards of integrity is required to preserve trust, while keeping the population informed and educated, as well as offering recommendations, on the basis of the latest scientific information available, with a gender perspective, in addition to avoiding the dissemination of false information – which only generates mistrust and fear among the population.

The costs incurred to contain pandemics are far from negligible; however, they do not affect the different population groups in the same way, this requires solidarity on the part of our society. For those at a low level of risk, the costs incurred by measures to contain pandemics may be high; however, for those at relatively high risk, actions that place additional risks on them (such as the risk of losing income or opportunities due to inability to go to work or travel) may be too high in cost. In this sense, dialogue and consensus comprise fundamental mechanisms to prevent and mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic

Bioethical Prospective

Our country is no stranger to this common challenge and has experience in dealing with pandemics, as happened in 2009 with the case of the AH1N1 virus, which was addressed through a committed coordination of all sectors of our society. In this regard, the role of the National Bioethics Commissions in this process should not be underestimated, as advisory bodies in the international field for the analysis of the challenges posed by health care and research with human subjects, in order to ensure protection of the rights of patients and research subjects; channel innovation and technological development in health with a social perspective; as well as consolidate epidemiological and research systems to strengthen prevention and health promotion measures.

The need to incorporate bioethical reflection in the deliberation of the challenges that transcend the borders of our nations and the gaps within our societies, is due to the opportunity to build –under a multidisciplinary, secular and, notably, global perspective– common understanding and identify shared values to address problems in the technological, ethical, legal and social fields, as well as presenting arguments that support or reject certain points of view, through argumentation, within a framework of tolerance and respect. In the case of this new pandemic, a synchronized approach is essential for the



success of any response effort. All members of the global community must act in solidarity, as all countries share a common vulnerability to the threat of infectious diseases.

The infrastructure in bioethics of our country has an innovative model that includes State Bioethics Commissions, as well as Hospital Bioethics Committees and Research Ethics Committees, as advisory bodies in the field of health care and research, which assume a very significant role in a pandemic context.

In this order of ideas, the National Bioethics Commission will seek the formation of a permanent collegiate body to review the bioethical aspects of pandemics, in order to consolidate the prevention mechanisms of our country. We reiterate our commitment to the protection of public health, as well as the generation of knowledge and strategies that contribute to the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We urge you to follow up on the guidelines of the National Bioethics Commission in relation to COVID-19 through the website: <https://www.gob.mx/salud/conbioetica>

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Manuel H Ruiz de Chávez
National Bioethics Commissioner of Mexico





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