

Handout B

Case study – “Let’s lose a million pounds!”

Your public health unit has been asked to comment on and participate in implementing some of the propositions put forward to meet the city’s goal in the “Let’s lose a million pounds!” challenge. Among the proposed initiatives is a junk food ban for all public buildings (schools, hospitals, government offices, etc.). Only foods deemed healthy will be offered in cafeterias and vending machines, and workers in public buildings will be encouraged to only bring healthy foods to their workplaces. Those seen to be in contravention will be asked to walk a kilometre.

Using the framework outlined below, please discuss this case in small groups (+/- 30 min.). We would like one person per group to summarize the group’s responses to the following questions:

- A. After an ethical examination of the program, would you approve it? For what reasons?
- B. Would the program have to be modified to make it ethically acceptable? Why?
- C. What was most helpful in the framework you used?
- D. Did the framework fail to highlight anything important?

To guide the discussion, your public health unit is using a slightly adapted version of the ethical framework by Marckmann et al. (2015).¹ It goes as follows:

First part – As a group, discuss and respond to the following questions, in order: (10-15 min.)

- 1- What are the expected **benefits** of the intervention for the target population?
(List the potential beneficial effects. Time permitting, consider their magnitude, likelihood, relevance and whether alternatives will have greater or lesser benefits.)
- 2- What are the potential burdens and **harms** of the intervention?
(List the potential negative effects. Time permitting, consider their severity, likelihood, relevance and whether alternatives will have greater or lesser harms.)
- 3- How does the intervention affect the **autonomy** of the individuals in the target population?
(Consider: Health-related empowerment ? Autonomous choice? Privacy and confidentiality?)

¹ Marckmann, G., Schmidt, H., Sofaer, N., & Strech, D. (2015). Putting public health ethics into practice: a systematic framework. *Frontiers in public health*, 3(23), 1-8.



Ethics practice for public health practitioners

TOPHC 2015

- 4- Impact on **equity**: how are benefits and burdens distributed?
(Consider: Access for all? Impact on health disparities? Compensation for any harms done?)
- 5- Expected **efficiency**: is it cost-effective?

Second part of the framework – Once you are done with the first part, as a group, discuss and respond to the following questions: (15-20 min.)

- **Can you identify some tensions between the 5 criteria (benefits, harms, autonomy, equity and efficiency) highlighted in the previous questions?**
- **For each tension, which criterion should prevail? Why?**
- **Is there a way to make the program more acceptable?**
- **Is there an ethically less challenging program or intervention that can achieve the same goal?**

This case is inspired by various million pound-type weight-loss initiatives. For example, in Southern Wisconsin (<http://www.princetonclub.net/mpc>), Oklahoma City (<https://www.thiscityisgoingonadiet.com/>), Houston (<http://www.shapeuphouston.org/about/millionpoundchallenge>), San Jose – Silicon Valley (<http://www.loseamillion.com/>), Canada (<http://www.public-value.cbc.radio-canada.ca/story/43/>) etc.