

Deliberation of the South Heartland District Health Department Ethics Committee

June 27, 2022

Ethical Issue for Deliberation: Public health roles and responsibilities for assuring treatment, and a client's rights of refusal.

The SHDHD Ethics Committee met in June of 2022 to consider a complex case study for a possible client refusal of healthcare and public health recommended treatment, which in turn could have impacted other family members and the community. It was the conclusion of the committee that all professionals involved had made a good faith effort in addressing this complex situation.

The committee found that actions on behalf of the South Heartland District Health Department could be justified on several grounds. First and foremost was the concern to maintain the client's individual rights of privacy and self-determination. While this is required by federal and state laws, it is also regarded as a best practice in the literature reviewed. Perhaps as importantly, this approach empowers the client to make decisions for themselves and their family without coercion from medical or health department professionals. Consulting with the client and introducing them to the various risks and potential long-term effects of their decision also allowed them the dignity of being able to make an informed decision.

While a utilitarian justification for coercive action could be made - i.e., that the greatest good for the greatest number would be attained by foregoing the client's individual rights to self-determination and emphasizing their communal responsibility – the committee chose not to consider this approach. Instead, the committee recommended a justice orientation focused on empowerment, respect, open communication, and, above all, an acknowledgement of, and deference to, the client's right to autonomy and self-determination.

The action proposed was optimal, given the circumstances, in that it was able to accomplish the SHDHD mission of public service, was proportional in that the public benefits did not infringe upon the individual's rights, and it was not necessary to override ethical claims to achieve the desired outcome. The approach of informing and encouraging the client to make the best decision for themselves, their family, and the community was accomplished keeping the principles of justice, equity, empowerment, and respect in mind.