

What is the ethical basis for requiring healthcare workers to be vaccinated against COVID-19?

Everyone shares ethical obligations to protect each other and work together during an emergency, which count in favour of being vaccinated.

In addition, healthcare workers have special ethical commitments and duties—that come from our roles working in healthcare—that make our ethical obligation to be vaccinated even stronger.

First, there are values at the very core of healthcare work such as beneficence and non-maleficence that favour vaccination.

Beneficence Doing good for patients and looking out for their interests [1]
Non-maleficence Do no harm. If nothing else, patients' interactions with healthcare workers should not be harmful [1]

Beneficence and non-maleficence combine to support the idea that healthcare workers should take reasonable steps to ensure the well-being of their patients and prevent harm to them [2],[3]. A safe, essentially painless vaccination that significantly protects a healthcare worker from being symptomatic with COVID-19, or from getting COVID-19 in the first place, protects patients' well-being and prevents them from being harmed [2],[4].

Second, Healthcare workers are also members of healthcare organizations. And, healthcare organizations such as hospitals have their own ethical obligations that favour staff vaccination. Some examples of these obligations include:

- keeping patients and workers safe, and
- being trustworthy and accountable in our relationships with the communities we serve

These personal, professional, and collective ethical duties are strong and deep for healthcare workers because they are embedded in the very nature of our work:

- people voluntarily choose to work in healthcare and therefore choose to be guided by these values [4]
- healthcare workers are powerful relative to patients' medical, social, and emotional vulnerability, so we owe patients special consideration [3]

What if I think I should not be required to get vaccinated against COVID-19 despite these values and obligations?

Some people may point to other ethical values, such as personal freedom, to say that they should be able to continue working in healthcare while not being vaccinated against COVID-19.

Despite values like personal freedom, a vaccine requirement can be ethically justified because:

- in a pandemic sometimes all values cannot be promoted together [5],[6] and difficult—even tragic—decisions must be made between them
- in a pandemic there is often a need to place greater ethical emphasis on the collective good [6]

- the decision-making process at St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton has been quite fair in that it has been transparent, responsive, and accountable [5]

Helpful Readings

- [1] T. L. Beauchamp and J. F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics, 5th edition*, 5th edition. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- [2] O. Anikeeva, A. Braunack-Mayer, and W. Rogers, "Requiring Influenza Vaccination for Health Care Workers," *Am. J. Public Health*, vol. 99, no. 1, p. 9, 2009.
- [3] A. Caplan, "Time to mandate influenza vaccination in health-care workers," *The Lancet*, vol. 378, no. 9788, pp. 310–311, Jul. 2011, doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(11)61156-2.
- [4] A. L. Ottenberg, J. T. Wu, G. A. Poland, R. M. Jacobson, B. A. Koenig, and J. C. Tilburt, "Vaccinating Health Care Workers Against Influenza: The Ethical and Legal Rationale for a Mandate," *Am. J. Public Health*, vol. 101, no. 2, pp. 212–216, Feb. 2011, doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2009.190751.
- [5] R. Upshur *et al.*, "Stand on guard for thee: Ethical considerations in preparedness planning for pandemic influenza," Joint Centre for Bioethics, Nov. 2005. Accessed: Oct. 21, 2021. [Online]. Available: https://jcb.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/stand_on_guard.pdf
- [6] M. Smith and R. Upshur, "Pandemic Disease, Public Health, and Ethics," *The Oxford Handbook of Public Health Ethics*, Sep. 09, 2019. <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190245191.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190245191-e-69> (accessed Oct. 06, 2021).