THE ETHICS OF PESTILENCE

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CASE DESCRIPTION

The primary subject-matter of this case is business ethics. Public policy, health, and politics represent secondary subject matters. This case is appropriate for sophomore level courses, in terms of difficulty. This case is designed to be taught in 2.5 class hours and requires 0.5 hours of outside preparation by students.

CASE SYNOPSIS

The student reading this case must decide the best course of action to immunize a population to a virus called COVID-30, given limited financial resources availability. In addition to the epidemic, this country is facing a looming food crisis. Monies earmarked for such a food crisis are however consolidated with funds for vaccine purchases. A cultural caveat to consider is this country's belief in Social Darwinism (the strong survive), which has seen splendid results socially and economically in a neighboring country. Dissenters find this ideology morally reprehensible and have begun to voice their opinion. If Social Darwinism is allowed to run its course, the effects of the famine could be mitigated. However, the vulnerable population may succumb to the disease. Conversely, if all are immunized, food scarcity may result in widespread starvation. Students must rely on their critical thinking abilities and knowledge of ethical frameworks to make a life or death decision.

CASE BODY

It is the year 2131 and a vaccine (Li & Garnsey, 2014) for COVID-30 virus has finally been discovered. COVID-30 has been ravaging the entire world for the past 13 months and a pharmaceutical company in Germany has finally discovered a viable vaccine. The cost of the vaccine is exorbitant since one of the ingredients is Berkelium (White et al., 2010), a very rare and expensive metal. The radioactivity from Berkelium (Hobart & Peterson, 2010) has been found to protect human lungs from any attempt of the virus to attack. Since Berkelium is not produced naturally on earth and therefore cannot be mined, it must be produced in labs which makes it very costly. Until now, only 350 grams have ever been synthesized and no practical use for it had been found until recently. As a result, there has been minimal innovation in the production of Berkelium and only now have scientists begun to find ways to produce Berkelium in large quantities.

The vaccine is estimated to bring the survival rate up to 99.5% as long as people take it prior to viral infection. This, compared to the current 18% death rate, is seen as an outstanding improvement. The world is relieved to know that the pharmaceutical industry has discovered the vaccine and is working on producing it in high volumes. There is, however, one major drawback. The vaccine, once in production, is estimated to cost around 2,200 USD per individual.

Atlantis, a poor country in Central Asia with a population of 3.4 million, has an overwhelming number of senior citizens, where 38% of the population are over the age of 60. Given that COVID-30 seems fatal mainly for the elderly, Atlantis has been hit hard by the virus. After receiving news of the discovery along with its costs, the country's minister of finance has calculated that they will need 7.48 billion USD to just purchase the vaccine. Furthermore, added costs of distributing and coordinating the injection of the vaccine, put estimates of the whole process of vaccinating its citizens at 7.65 billion USD. This is extremely difficult for the country to pay due to its poor financial state. The Senate has established a national emergency budget of 8 billion USD for the next five years, meaning the cost of purchasing the vaccine would use nearly the entire budget. To make things worse, the country has been battling a locust infestation (Goldberg, 1996) on farms for the past few months and, if not treated well, could lead to a lack of crops and potentially a famine (Cheng & Shi, 2019), thus, resulting in people of all ages to die.

Atlantis firmly believes in Social Darwinism (Rudman & Saud, 2020). This means that they are drawn towards the idea of having the weak people in the society die out and have the strong prosper. This has been an ongoing experiment over the past century in a neighboring country which has seen success in this regard. The country's GDP has nearly doubled, IQ ratings have gone up by more than 5 points on average within elementary school kids, and babies born with birth defects have decreased from 1 in 28 to 1 in 24. These are just some of the many advantages the country has seen over the past century. Recently, Atlantis has adopted Social Darwinism into its economic and social systems in hope of achieving similar results. The COVID-30 pandemic is the first big opportunity for Atlantis to advance their population by implementing Social Darwinist measures.

One suggestion from Atlantis' president's administration, which received major support of the leading officials, was to only vaccinate the population below the age of 60. This would cut costs by nearly 40% putting estimates at around 4.74 billion USD. This would leave nearly 3 billion USD to go towards the locust infestation and other national emergencies. Its estimated, however, that the cost of locust exterminating efforts will be around 5.9 billion USD. If the country decides not to vaccinate its elderly population, it will decrease the elderly population, saving the country an estimated 500 million USD on average per year over the next 10 years due to decreased healthcare and pension expenses. All this money could go towards helping Atlantis develop quicker than that of other countries, giving them an advantage in international trade.

A second suggestion coming from Darwinist research scientist Dimitry Bagehot at Atlantis University proposes an even more radical tactic. This approach builds on the suggestion given by the administration, but takes it a few steps further. Bagehot suggests that the country should not only limit the distribution by giving the vaccines only to the younger citizens of Atlantis, but that the country should also limit to whom they give the vaccine even from those under the agreed-upon age limit. First of all, Bagehot and his team of research scientists do not believe that age limit should be set at 60, but instead at 57, since that is the age when more than 50% of the elderly disease cases begin. Bagehot's main suggestion is however to exclude more of those who may be considered a burden to the country. Some of these suggestions are to exclude people with any form of disability or serious illness, the entire prison population, people whose IQ is in the bottom 25%, those over the age of 30 who do not have formal education, and families who are more susceptible to chronic diseases based on previous family medical history (Claassen et al., 2010).

Although many people in Atlantis believe that Bagehot's ideas are extreme, some of these demographic discriminations (Mulkeen, 2020) are being considered by the Senate due to the financial advantages. After narrowing down the population to be vaccinated in accordance with Bagehot's standards, Atlantis will be left with only 9% of the population needing to be vaccinated. Given that this is around 300,000 people, it is estimated to cost a total of only 750 million USD. This would leave plenty of money for the country to prosper, and advance, to keep future generations far from poverty.

However, a minority of the country's population considers that it is immoral for the nation's leaders to make such decisions. They firmly believe that everyone should be given equal opportunity to survive, and that nobody should be discriminated against by the government. This group of people has attempted to protest for a few months now but got shut down by the government law enforcement very quickly. Although Atlantis claims to believe in freedom of speech (Wright, 2020), these protests were disbanded because all that goes against Social Darwinism in the country has been deemed to be 'hate speech' (Barendt, 2019). Some of the protestors have gone as far as to announce that they would give their own vaccine to one of the elders whom they claim, 'need it more than we do'. This sign of sacrifice has made big headlines in the country making it extremely hard for the government to make a decision during this pandemic.

The country is facing a difficult decision. Should the government simply vaccinate everyone and risk a famine in the entire country, or should the government strive to implement Social Darwinism and allow the virus to eliminate some of the country's burden for 'the greater good of the country and the people'

INSTRUCTOR'S NOTES

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHING APPROACHES: "*The Ethics of Pestilence*" is a case study written by Masud Khawaja and Simeon Gellert. According to the case, a country has limited resources and is faced with two life-threatening challenges; an epidemic and a potential food-shortage. The reader must decide how to best use limited resources. No matter the decision, risk of death is sure to befall some group of people. The reader must utilize critical thinking and ethics to decide what is best. This case can be used in a classroom to demonstrate how ethical frameworks may be used. Before the case is discussed in class, students should read the case beforehand and brainstorm what decision they would make and why. During class, students can be divided into groups of 4-5 where they will debate and reach consensus on which decision is best for each question, which ethical frameworks to use, or other sources, as evidence to support their claims.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

1) ***Should the government simply vaccinate everyone and risk a famine in the entire country or should the government strive to implement Social Darwinism and allow the virus to eliminate some of the country's burden for "the greater good of the country and the people"?***
    1. Vaccinate Everyone
    2. It is likely to be perceived as the fairer option.
    3. It does not discriminate based on prohibited grounds (race, religion, disability, age, etc.).
    4. It adheres to ideals of Social Justice; meaning, everyone is given the same access to an opportunity.

5. Do not vaccinate everyone
   i. A famine is impending and vaccinating everyone will ensure this outcome. By choosing not to vaccinate everyone some, or all, of the crop can be saved.
   ii. Neighboring countries experienced boons socially and financially by employing Social Darwinism, and Atlantis is likely to experience similar outcomes.

2) Is there a moral difference between the first and the second proposal on how to distribute the vaccines?

1. Yes
   i. In the option to selectively immunize, the decision maker is discriminating against people based on prohibited grounds. This makes the action more immoral (In the same sense that threat motivated by hate is worse than a threat motivated by anger).
2. No
   i. An action is either infinitely moral or immoral. The degree to which you drag it out won't make a difference because the action is already deemed to be infinitely immoral.

3) Is it morally correct for Atlantis to decide the value of the life of a human?

i. Yes
   i. The lives of those who are less advanced are worth less in the same sense that an animal's life is less valuable to us than a human life.

ii. No
   ii. Life is intrinsically invaluable, and it does not depend on other people's opinions.

4) Does an increase in a person's vulnerability to disease make their life less valuable?

1. Yes
   i. Yes, because they are more likely to die before they have provided maximal benefits to those around them, as compared to a less vulnerable person who will be able to provide a full lifetime of benefits to those around them.
   ii. Yes, because they are more likely to get sick and not be able to care for themselves, causing burdens to those who must care for them.
2. No
   i. No, because human life is intrinsically invaluable.

5) Under which condition, if any, should a person's life be sacrificed for a financial benefit?

i. When the finances saved by the sacrifice are greater than finances needed to save more than one person.
ii. When the person is likely to succumb to ailments anyways, meaning resources spent on them would be wasted.
iii. Under no circumstance
iv. Since human life is invaluable, it should never be traded in for financial benefit.

6) Is the government of Atlantis morally obligated to value the life of every single individual in the country or rather just the country as a whole?

a. Value the life of every individual
b. Since human life is invaluable, the government should put equal value on every single life in the country.
c. Value the country as a whole
d. It will do the greatest good for the greatest number of people of the government views the country as whole rather than single individuals.

7) How much weight should be put on saving the lives of the elderly citizens of Atlantis?

1. Little weight

i. They drain health resources and are likely not contributing to productivity in the economy.
ii. Money spent on pensions and old age security could be better spent on social services for the young, given the country's financial situation.

2. Lots of weight

i. Every life is valuable, including that of elderly citizens.

8) If Social Darwinism is to be implemented as suggested by Bagehot, would it be morally justifiable or is the idea inherently evil?

1. It is morally justifiable
   ii. It will boost the country's GDP as well as other indicators of social development. Future generations will live better lives, unburdened by financial pressures faced by the previous.
2. It is inherently evil

i. Nobody should be discriminated against and have their lives put at risk in the name of enabling humanity to prosper. Even if this may be of value to future generations, all human life is equally valuable, and we should not "sacrifice" people now for the "good" of future generations.

9) Should government have such power over its citizens or does this infringe on inherent human rights that individuals possess?

a. Government should be given the power

i. The government is usually composed of elected officials who have been deemed responsible for ultimate decision-making power in most regards. This includes making decisions for citizens.

ii. The government has access to resources and multiple perspectives that provide a broader view of the present and projected outcomes for their country. They may know much more about a situation than any one, or group of, citizens.

iii. Not being given something does not necessarily infringe on inherent human rights. Many publicly funded resources are not available to classes of citizens for different reasons.

b. It infringes on our inherent human rights

iv. Many times, throughout history iron law of oligarchy has shown that no government of sufficient size and tenure can be trusted with power. In matters of life and death, government scrutiny must be tenfold.

v. We all have a right to live and nobody should be deciding the value of our life for us.

10) Under which condition, if any, should it be up to the government to decide the value of the life of its citizens?

a) Under the condition that the people are unable to make that decision themselves.

b) Under the emergency conditions where the government must make a quick decision with a trade-off, neither of which have all too favorable outcomes.

c) Under no condition.

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