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Original article

# Medical ethics and pandemic emergencies

## *La ética médica y las emergencias de pandemia*

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### Abstract

2018 is the 100th anniversary of an influenza epidemic that took the lives of between fifty and a hundred million people. Traditional medical ethics places the primary obligation of medical personnel on the care of individual patients. Yet in a time of pandemic emergency, the sheer scope of demand for medical treatment may well make it impossible to meet both the public health needs of collective humanity and the collected needs of individual patients. Medical ethics must address this dilemma.

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*Keywords:* Duty to populations; Influenza; Medical ethics; Pandemic; Public health

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### Resumen

Dos mil dieciocho es el centésimo aniversario de una epidemia de influenza que ha cobrado entre 50 y 100 millones de víctimas. La ética médica tradicional coloca la obligación primaria del personal médico en la atención de pacientes individuales. Sin embargo, en tiempos de

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emergencia de pandemia, el puro y simple ámbito de las demandas de tratamiento médico puede hacer imposible satisfacer al mismo tiempo las exigencias de salud pública de la humanidad entera y del conjunto de las necesidades de los pacientes individuales. La ética médica tiene que enfocar este dilema.

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*Palabras clave:* Deberes hacia la población; Influenza; Ética médica; Pandemia; Salud pública

## Introduction

One hundred years ago this year the human species endured the most deadly influenza attack in all history. People were not prepared for the onslaught of influenza in 1918. We are still not prepared for a global pandemic emergency of that level of virulence. My concern in the present paper is to note that the ethical preparation of the medical profession lags well behind the profession's clinical preparation.

While the death toll from the Bubonic Plague of the Middle Ages was higher as a percentage of the human population, the total number of deaths from the 1918 influenza (sometimes called "the Spanish Flu") was significantly higher. According to John Barry's book, *The Great Influenza*,

The lowest estimate of the pandemic's worldwide death toll is twenty-one million, in a world with a population less than one-third of today's [2004]. That estimate comes from a contemporary study of disease and newspapers have often cited it since, but it is almost certainly wrong. Epidemiologists today estimate that influenza likely caused at least fifty million deaths worldwide, and possibly as many as one hundred million. (p. 4)

One of the reasons that the influenza spread so rapidly was that 1918 was a time of war. In all of the belligerent countries soldiers were transferred from training facility to training facility, from training facility to the battlefield in staggering numbers. At the same time, in the nations at war, news about the spread and virulence of the influenza was suppressed by national censorship regimes on the ground that bad news was likely to damage war morale. (Only in neutral Spain was there open media

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