

Ethics guidance for the use of scarce resources in the delivery of critical health care during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic faces governments with the obligation of allocating the greatest possible amount of resources to meet health care needs. However, we may encounter situations in which available resources (such as ventilators or ICU beds) are not sufficient to meet all the needs of the population. This is a morally tragic scenario because we know we should provide treatment to all who need it. In this scenario, we must proceed ethically: since we cannot do everything that we should do, what is the most ethical path of action? Responsible action calls for health authorities to establish criteria for the priority-setting decisions that may be necessary in this scenario.

This brief ethics guidance provides four basic recommendations to guide the work of health authorities. It has been developed on the basis of prior guidance and their adaptations to the context of the pandemic.¹

Recommendations:

1. **Establish transparent priority-setting criteria:** The existence of transparent, publicly available criteria strengthens the population's trust of the health authority, which is key to its support of the response, and alleviates the burden on health care providers since they are not tasked with determining these criteria.
2. **Saving the highest number of lives:** Saving the highest number of lives is a fundamental criterion that implies prioritizing those in the best clinical conditions to survive treatment, over those who will hardly recover, even with treatment. It should be clear that this does not constitute abandoning patients: they must always be provided palliative care even if it is not possible to offer treatment.
3. **Prioritize those tasked with saving the lives of others:** Persons like health care providers risk their lives to save the lives of others. Prioritizing their treatment is thus a matter of justice, and further allows saving the highest number of lives because of their role providing care to others.
4. **Treat every person equitably:** All persons in the same situation (with COVID-19 or other disease) must be treated in the same way. In response to justice and equity it is fundamental to ensure that there are no departures based on privilege or discrimination due to differences in race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, economic resources or other criteria unrelated to these recommendations.

¹ WHO, 2020: [Ethics and COVID-19: resource allocation and priority-setting](#); PAHO, 2020: [Ethics guidance on issues raised by the novel coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#); WHO, 2016: [Guidance for managing ethical issues in infectious disease outbreaks](#); WHO, 2007: [Ethical considerations in developing a public health response to pandemic influenza](#); PAHO, 2015: [Zika ethics consultation: ethics guidance on key issues raised by the outbreak](#); Emanuel et al, NEJM 2020: [Fair allocation of scarce medical resources in the time of Covid-19](#).