

## Correspondence

# Virtues in public health: easing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

### ABSTRACT

Public health and ethics are commonly regarded as separate concepts. However, this paper argues that public health must be grounded in ethical virtues. The need to carefully integrate ethical practice in public health is a response to ease the negative impact of coronavirus disease 2019 to future generations. Hence, the virtue of compassion is proposed to hurdle the effects of the pandemic.

**Keywords** virtue ethics, pandemic, public health, compassion

The current public health situation compels us to reflect on how humanity navigates the uncharted waters of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The recent article published in this journal advocates a proactive approach in responding to the challenges brought by COVID-19 as well as providing adequate support to the medical community.<sup>1</sup> However, being proactive also necessitates moral decision-making that is anchored upon ethics. The common practice is that public health focuses on populations rather than individuals, whereas ethics is concerned with the governance of a person's conduct. This delineation encourages the natural tendency to separate the two concepts. Yet, recent studies argue that public health policies should also be grounded on ethical actions such as collaboration.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, compelling reasons to adopt (virtue) ethical theories to public health were put forward by scholars, such as the need to (1) balance public health and individual rights, (2) mitigate the distance between

public health professionals and the individuals targeted by policies and (3) share common values between public health professionals and citizens.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the call for integrating virtue ethics to public health while the world reels from the effects of the pandemic, the author proposes a virtue ethic of compassion (See Table 1). With the rising number of COVID-19 infections, numerous deaths and the downward spiral of the economy in many countries, there is a need for sympathetic concern for the sufferings of others. This is necessary to successfully hurdle the 'third wave' of COVID-19.<sup>4</sup>

A close examination on some of the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic shows apathy and indifference. A recent editorial on the collateral damage of COVID-19 points out the price that the younger generations have to pay in order to protect the older generations from the catastrophic effects of the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Since virtue points to actions that are 'between

**Table 1** Virtue, extremes and practical application to public health

	Extremes	Virtue	Extremes
Applications	Apathy and indifference Lack of interest for the public health and welfare of other people	Compassion Attending to the needs of the people who suffer due to the challenges brought about by the pandemic	Cruelty and harshness Inflict suffering and taking advantage of the health crisis

two extremes,<sup>6</sup> there is a need to carefully integrate ethical practice in public health to support the most vulnerable in the society and ease the negative impact of COVID-19 to future generations.

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## Conflict of Interest

None declared.

## References

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Fides A. del Castillo  
Theology and Religious Education Department, De La Salle  
University, Manila 0922, Philippines

Address correspondence to Fides A. del Castillo,  
E-mail: fides.delcastillo@dlsu.edu.ph.

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