

# Ethics as a Tool for Deliberation and for the Development of Healthy Public Policies: The Case of Unsanitary Housing in Montreal

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# Agenda

- Guidelines for reporting and intervening
- Background
- Reporting
- Initial management
- Medical/environmental survey
- Survey results and recommendations
- Follow-up

# Intervention guidelines

- Primacy of health protection
- Scientific rigour
- Equity
- Proportionality
- Precaution
- Empowerment
- Transparency
- Openness

From Drapeau S., **Cadre de référence en gestion des risques pour la santé dans le réseau québécois de la santé publique.** Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2003, 85 pages.

Agence de la santé  
et des services sociaux  
de Montréal

Québec 

# Background

- **Sanitary problems in Montreal housing**
  - Mould
  - Mites
  - Cockroaches
  - Mice (sometimes rats)
  - Growing problem of bedbugs in Montreal
  - Etc.
- **Health effects**
  - Respiratory health problems (allergies, irritants and infectious agents)
  - Dermatological problems
  - Mental health? (e.g. symptoms of anxiety and depression)
  - Sleep quality?
  - Social isolation?
  - Harmful, toxic products used by exterminators?
  - Impact on general health
  - Etc.
- **Ethical principle:** Primacy of health protection, scientific rigour, precaution

# Reporting

- Call received from a school
- Bedbugs found on a student
  - School's administrators notify the father, who denies that there is a problem
  - Call made to the father
  - Says that there is indeed a problem, but is too afraid of the repercussions if he lodges a complaint with the city
- Ethical principle: Empowerment

# Initial management

- By-law concerning the sanitation and the maintenance of housing units
  - Standards in effect
    - Tenant must send a registered letter to the owner explaining the problem and demanding that action be taken within 10 days.
    - If nothing is done, the tenant can call the city inspector.
    - Notice of an infraction
    - Report of an infraction

# Initial management

- Father's fear of the owner
- According to the father, the problem is widespread.
- Fear of school authorities with respect to the infestation
- Joint decision made by the CSSS and the DSP to lodge a complaint about the building with the borough in the name of the tenant
- **Guiding ethical principles:** primacy of health protection, empowerment, confidentiality

# Initial management

- The municipal inspector issues a notice of infraction concerning the owner's building.
- Precautionary measures taken by the school to avoid dispersal of bedbugs.
- Dwelling is treated, the father reports that the problem has been solved.
- **Ethical principle:** openness



# Initial management

- Several weeks later a call is received from the school.
  - The student has again brought bedbugs into the school.
  - To protect its employees, the school decides to expel the child.
- **Ethical principle:** proportionality

# Initial management

- In early April, Dr. Perron visited the home of the expelled child
- Dr. Perron's observations:
  - The exterminator sold insecticides for the tenant to apply himself.
  - The dwelling is in a run-down state due to poor maintenance by the owner (mould in several areas, mouldy debris on the floor).
  - A fragment of paint was seen on the floor.
  - Several members of the family repeatedly showed symptoms of upper respiratory tract infections.
  - The children presented with pica.
  - No bedbugs were visible, ruling out a severe infestation but not excluding their presence.
- Recommendation made that the school take the student back.
- **Ethical principles:** Primacy of health protection, precaution

# Medical/environmental survey

- Following the finding on the run-down state of the building and after consulting with the CSSS and the *Environnement urbain et santé* (EUS) team at the DSP, a decision is made to conduct a medical/environmental survey
- Meeting organized with the CSSS, the DSP, community care givers and the borough to develop an action strategy (mid-April)
- Two key components: sanitation issues and medical questionnaire
- **Ethical principles:** primacy of health protection, openness, precaution

# Medical/environmental survey DSP-CSSS

- Survey objectives
  - To detect health problems caused by housing conditions
  - To ensure appropriate management by providing the required service corridors
    - Psychosocial – CSSS
    - Medical – DSP
  - To make recommendations to the City based on our findings
    - Taking over building management
    - Eradication of vermin
    - Relocation notice for the family in poor health or with rapidly deteriorating health due to the dwelling
    - Sealed for excessive contamination following the relocation
  - To collaborate with the tenant rights organization for legal assistance
  - To ensure that management of the building will be taken over so that the unsafe conditions are brought to an end
  - **Ethical principles:** primacy of health protection, empowerment, precaution, equity, proportionality

# Medical/environmental survey

- Medical/environmental survey (end of May, beginning of June)
  - CSSS – DSP
  - Hygienist - DSP
  - CSSS nurses, DSP physician
  - Social care givers from the CSSS
  - Community groups with mandates from the CSSS to organize meetings with tenants and for translation services

# Medical/environmental survey

- Use of a partly validated questionnaire on:
  - General health
  - Antecedents
  - Respiratory, dermatological and mental health
  - The environment and quality of life
  - Presence of mould and vermin
- **Ethical principle:** scientific rigour

# Survey results and recommendations

- Environmental health
  - The buildings and a sufficient number of dwellings were visited to establish a profile
  - Significant building envelope problems were found, with water infiltration in many places
  - Significant, active water damage in many dwellings
  - Widespread presence of mould
- Recommendations made to the City's inspection department to follow up with the owner and ensure that sanitary living conditions are provided in the buildings
- **Ethical principles:** health protection, transparency and precaution

# Survey results and recommendations

- Health
  - Observations
    - Approximately 50% of tenants were reached
    - Dwelling-related health problems in over half of the units
      - Particularly related to respiratory, dermatological and mental health
    - Potentially dangerous and ineffective management of the bedbug problem (the extermination company sold extermination products to the tenant)
    - Notable presence of mice and cockroaches in the building
    - Paint chips falling off walls in the dwelling and presence of mouldy debris.



# Survey results and recommendations

- Many dwellings with related health problems or threats that are serious enough to recommend relocation.
- Some tenants accepted immediately; others accepted in the weeks that followed.
- Recommendations made to the inspection service to relocate tenants, coordinating with the CSSS and City's housing agency.
- Corridors of service established for some patients.
- Recommendations made to the City on how to deal with the cockroach, bedbug and mice infestations.
- **Ethical principles:** empowerment balanced with health protection and precaution, among other principles

# Follow-up

- Follow-up strategy currently being developed with the CSSS.
- **Ethical principle:** primacy of health protection

# Thoughts on public policies and housing

- Macro strategies
- Meso strategies
- Micro strategies

# Questions?