

## **Case 9: Are there limits to our obligations to volunteer for humanitarian work?**

**Key words: can/ought; conflicting obligations; limits to obligations; personal integrity**

You have recently returned from post-deployment leave. You get a call to say that your name is being suggested for a short notice deployment on a humanitarian mission. The likely length of this deployment is 60 days. Your name has come up because you have essential skills that would be very valuable on this operation, and which are actually in short supply at the present time. Others *could* be found to replace you (perhaps less well, but certainly adequately). You have seen the news reports about the disaster that has prompted the operation. It is serious and you are sympathetic both to the plight of those affected and to a certain 'calling' to go; given that you are a healthcare professional and can imagine that your skills could be put to good use. Your immediate line manager states that in their opinion you have solid grounds to refuse this deployment, given how recently you have returned from another tour. They add that they would support you if you decided to make such a case: the decision is entirely yours. If you decide to go, you will have to leave for some hastily convened pre-deployment training within the next few days.

### **Issues raised by the case**

1. Role conflict / dual responsibilities (duty to military vs duties to self and others).
2. Maintaining personal integrity.
3. Distinguishing what one can do from what one ought to do and the relationship between having the skills to provide help and having the obligation to provide help.
4. Fairness (justice principle).

### **Potential learning outcomes**

1. Identification and consideration of the pertinent ethical issues.
2. Coping with moral distress / dual loyalty conflict.
3. Beginning to understand and apply different moral paradigms to address issues and associated problems.
4. Beginning to understand how ethical issues may be anticipated and avoided.

### **1. The decision is yours; what are the relevant factors you might wish to take into account?**

*This is trying to get the learners to think about what factors could be taken into account when making any decision that has an ethical dimension. In particular, within the*

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context of this decision, this includes the concerns that being a serving member of the military brings. Possible ideas include, but are by no means limited to:

- Your understanding of the scope of your duties as a healthcare professional / medical support worker.
- Your reasons and motivations for working within the military.
- How unique and therefore valuable your skills might be and the relationship between having skills and having a moral obligation to use those skills.
- The nature of the disaster to which you will be responding - e.g. what the risks to you might be, how austere the environment might be etc.
- Whether the deployment will disrupt your training / lead you to lose out on other opportunities offered by your current job (such as promotion) - imagine perhaps that this is a job you have aspired to and which has already been disrupted by your previous deployment;
- The effect on your colleagues of having to cover another short-notice 'hard gap' in your role; which slack your colleagues will have to absorb (for the second time in a row).
- Whether you have family commitments and what these are (e.g. young children, older children, disabled relatives for whom you are a carer, elderly parents etc.).
- An existing health condition. Assume for the sake of argument that the disaster poses no particular risks / challenges to your condition, such that there would be specific occupational health reasons not to go / that your condition will not affect how effectively you are able to function in the suggested role and environment.
- How near you are to the end of your military career.

## **2. Is there an ethical principle that could be applied to decide whether there is a difference between 'relevant' and 'morally relevant' factors in a decision?**

*'Relevant factors' means that the reason is material to the issue in question, and may seem obvious; for example, asking yourself 'are my skills really the right ones for this role'? It really depends on where the decision-maker's principal focus and individual moral map lies as to what they deem as relevant. It is not a completely pragmatic decision - which leads us onto the next question.*

## **3. How would you describe the types of factors that you thought were morally relevant? Do you think they were looking at the consequences of your decision or do you think they were formulated in terms of what do I owe this / these person/s? Or both?**

*This question is trying to get the learner to reflect upon their own moral framework, and how that is affected by and impacts upon their role within the military.*

*For example, does the decision-maker have a general moral framework that operates on the basis of trying to produce consequences that are for 'the greater good'; and if so how far does that extend? For if it is only in terms of 'self-interest or motivation' this would seem in binary opposition to what is generally understood as an application of the utilitarian construction of 'the greatest good for all with the minimization of harm'.*

*How far does an individual's application of the 'greatest good' go? Does it include family, friends, colleagues, fellow UK citizens, all human beings, all sentient beings etc.?*

*The original construction of utilitarianism focuses exclusively on the overall consequences of an action to determine its moral rightness – which action creates the most good for 'everyone' with the least amount of harm? In this classic construction of utilitarianism, everyone counts - potential overseas patients, military and non-military colleagues, family, friends and the individual themselves etc. However, the individual (and their closest family members) has no greater worth than all of the other people that are likely to be affected by the consequences, which many will find counter-intuitive.*

*The other problem with trying to judge what the likely consequences of any particular action will be is that it is very difficult to accurately predict exactly how the future will unfold - there may be additional factors that the decision-maker is unaware of, or a number of just as likely scenarios.*

*Other learners may use a duty-based approach to making decisions - what duties do I owe myself and others? But again, the decision-maker is going to have to consider who counts as others. In this type of context, the decision-maker may see themselves as having one overriding duty; for example, to give service in the military, despite the option to legitimately ask not to be redeployed. A further later question explores this idea, with the question: is there still an obligation to serve if you have just come back from deployment and could effectively refuse it without adverse personal consequences?*

*Other duty orientated decision-makers may construct the decision in terms of: "to whom do I owe what?" So, an individual may have concurrent duties as a parent, carer, family member, family supporter, friend, colleague, citizen and serving member of the armed forces. Therefore, the individual may try and meet the most duties that they can - but will not necessarily be able to fulfil all of them. In this case they will need to appeal to some other principle to help place these competing duties in order of priority.*

*The problem with a strict duty-based approach is that whilst it can be a useful way of framing a problem, it is not always effective when trying to make a decision where there are conflicting duties. This is because you are left with a decision to make that will also potentially leave a number of duties unfulfilled. Therefore, a mechanism is needed to determine which duties are paramount, and that will likely depend upon the context and consequences. In an ethical dilemma, which is by definition a clash of competing ethical tensions, someone or something will inevitably lose out. It seems*

*that it is often the case of deliberating the possible courses of action in order to achieve the 'least bad' option.*

*Therefore, it is possible that individuals will have / develop their own moral framework and internal 'code of ethics' that takes from both consequentialist and duty-based moral approaches. It should be stressed here that decisions taken in moral / ethical dilemmas will all be subjective in nature; as everyone acts differently based on their own personal circumstances / background etc.*

#### **4. Would your considerations be different if the disaster in question was in the UK? Or elsewhere close by in the EU?**

*This may have been discussed by students in the previous question. But if students have not picked this issue up, please highlight it to them. (Please see notes above for answer.) Do we count people geographically nearer us as having greater moral worth, or as having some 'common bond', or sense of belongingness with us (such as fellow countrymen, people from the same continent etc.)? We almost certainly do, but it is defensible in principle?*

#### **5. What are the improper factors that arguably shouldn't be taken into account? Is self-interest, motivation or even care immoral?**

*A construction of 'self-interest' is very often portrayed as unethical, but self-interest, motivation and care are proper ethical factors that should be taken into account when making a moral decision. Consequentialism looks at the consequences for all; including the individual decision-maker and a duty-based ethical framework does include a duty to self, duty as a parent, etc.*

*Therefore, just because an individual may benefit from a particular decision that they make, it does not make it an ethically illegitimate one. Self-sacrifice and selflessness may be above and beyond what is required by an ordinary moral person. Such acts are considered 'heroic' because they go beyond the ethical norms of accepted behaviour, and therefore (unassumingly or unwittingly in the traditional sense of heroism) attract praise or reward.*

*Therefore, if an individual avails him or herself of a legitimate opportunity not to redeploy because of self-care, this may not make the decision automatically unethical. What would make it automatically unethical would be if the decision-maker deliberately subverted the process, or was dishonest.*

*Arguably, trivial personal reasons could be seen as improper factors. The counter-argument to this is that they may be objectively trivial, but subjectively important (especially straight after returning from another deployment of unspecified length and complexity). If an individual is given a real choice, an ethical exercise of their autonomy may mean that a trivial reason would be sufficient.*

#### **6. Which overriding principle should dominate such decisions:**

- **The greater good of the military / country? Or,**
- **The good of the individual: self-interest +/- motivation?**

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*Members of the UK armed forces have been motivated to voluntarily join the military services on the understanding or wish that their overall individual good is best served by being in the military. This will typically be for a variety of reasons, and could include: career path / job role options, the military lifestyle, the travel, the challenge, answering a perceived calling, financial reasons (secure job and good pension) etc.*

*However, there are occasions when an individual's self-interests, needs and desires and 'the needs (or good) of the organisation' will not be in full alignment (or may be in complete opposition). Also bear in mind that the 'needs' of the Service can differ from the 'good' of the Service. Generally, it is understood that an individual has signed up to meet 'the needs of the Service' even if at times that conflicts with their wishes etc. Military service is for the most part not a 'pick and mix' career, it is a total package (with caveats of new flexible working patterns and career profiles). But what if someone is given a choice of prioritising their own self-interest or the good of the military and its mission? What should a serving member of the armed forces choose?*

*Is there an ethical expectation that a serving member of the armed forces, even if given a choice, should choose the risky / personally bad option for the good of the military/ the nation?*

*Some may argue that there is a perception that any individual that has "taken the Queen's shilling" will act 'automatically' for the good of their country, as their training will have instilled this ethos into them. This may involve working above and beyond the everyday norms of ethical behaviour and legitimate self-interest. Being a member of the armed forces may also mean that an individual feels pressure (peer, community, Service or family etc.) to perform to such a level that more selfless, altruistic acts and uncommon bravery become the new ethical norm for them.*

*Whilst others may argue that there is a legitimate option not to redeploy, so contractually there is no obligation to deploy and the individual likely has other, competing ethical duties and considerations which are important too. It is now accepted in the military that you can choose to turn down deployments, and reduce your Service commitment in order to manage these other competing ethical duties more effectively. The theory is that this leads to a happier, less disgruntled military workforce.*