In today’s world of medicine and ethics, there exists a large controversy over the government’s right to isolate individuals carrying contagious diseases. Some argue for individuals’ rights to liberty and fair treatment and consider quarantine a dehumanizing punishment. Others worry for the safety of the public when exposed to sick individuals. Despite the ethical grey-area that overarches quarantining, the fact remains that the US Constitution imposes a duty on its government to look after the country’s citizens. With adequate scientific and medical evidence, the government should be given the right to quarantine individuals who pose a threat to the overall health of society.

A common aspect of the quarantine controversy is the ethics concerned with depriving a citizens of basic rights granted by the Bill of Rights. The amendments guarantee people liberty and protect against cruel and unusual punishment. Quarantine and isolation strip patients of a free range of motion, and restrict communication with others; for these reasons, they can be seen as unfair punishment for an uncontrollable illness. In 1915, a cook named Mary Malone, coined “Typhoid Mary,” was sent to isolation in North Brother Island after she refused to cooperate with diagnostic tests for her illness. She was sent away from her friends and family, forbidden to return to her normal life; she spent her last years alone until she died in 1938 (Marineli, 2007). Mary’s forced isolation is seen, to this day, as a criminal violation of the Bill of Rights. However, it is important to note that Mary’s refusal to obey health officials caused her to continue handling food products while infected with salmonella. That year, over 3000 citizens of
New York caught typhoid, showing the disastrous effects of Mary’s actions (Markel, 2014). While her suffering was tragic, the typhoid epidemic that caused widespread illness and death in New York raises the question whether the public’s safety should be taken into account and prioritized over the rights and liberties of one person.

In the case of Typhoid Mary, governmental intervention was necessary to protect the greater public. Had she cooperated with prior hospitalization as recommended by health officials, it would not have been necessary to isolate her to such an extreme extent. Therefore, the educate, scientific opinions of medical professionals should be adhered to when regarding the quarantine of individuals. If there is adequate medical evidence that can prove that an individual poses a danger to the public, then the government should have the right to put the public’s safety first. Doing otherwise would violate the basic duty of the government to put the people first, as laid out in the Constitution. Thus, science should govern the ethics of quarantine and isolation.

Works Cited