Letter from the Editor

Historically there was direction from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Muslim scholars on physicians' obligations to their patients, all of which required avoidance of harm. However, such an impervious was not properly considered for experimentation involving humans until the middle of the 20th century, although such research has been increasingly conducted from the 18th century onwards. Thus ethics in relation to the use of human subjects in research is comparatively new. Nevertheless, there are now numerous ethics guidelines for research involving humans developed by international, regional and national organizations. Their common purpose is to protect the rights and safety of research participants by promoting ethical conduct of research. Central to such guidelines is that research requires ethical review and approval by a competent Research Ethics Committee and that participants must give their informed consent to take part. In 2011 WHO published Standards and operational guidance for ethics review of health-related research with human participants which provides updated guidance on the research ethics review process and aims to help those responsible for drafting national, local and institutional regulations and policies in relation to ethics review of health-related research involving humans.

Journals are in a position to ensure that the research that they publish adheres to such ethical guidelines, but how far do they do so? A paper from Saudi Arabia included in this issue assessed how often ethical conduct of human subject research was documented in studies published in Saudi Arabian medical journals between 1979 and 2007. The study found a low documentation rate suggesting editor's lack of rigor and/or investigators' ignorance of guidelines. However, after the year 2000 an ongoing improvement was found.

World Hepatitis Day is held each year on 28 July to raise awareness and understanding of viral hepatitis and the diseases it causes. Hepatitis B and C are growing threats in the region: it is estimated that 4.3 million persons are infected with hepatitis B virus and 800 000 with hepatitis C virus each year.

Research published in this issue on hepatocellular cancer in Yemen found chronic hepatitis B and C virus infection were the most frequently identified risk factors. Needlestick injury (NSI) is a significant risk factor for bloodborne infections such as hepatitis B and C, and a study on interns and medical students in the Palestine Occupied Territories reports that over 40% of the participants had experienced at least 1 NSI but only 46.7% of the interns were immunized against hepatitis B.

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