

Summary report on the

Annual meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Research Ethics Review Committee

WHO-EM/RPC/048/E

Cairo, Egypt
17 November 2020



REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE

World Health
Organization

Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC) meets annually for strategic planning and to ensure compliance of health research in the Region with WHO policies and international guidelines for research on human subjects. This year, to align with COVID-19 infection prevention protocols, the RERC met via an innovative platform on 17 November 2020, at the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in Cairo, Egypt, and online.

The meeting was attended by Committee members from Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Pakistan, Sudan and Tunisia, in addition to UNESCO representatives (from headquarters and Arab States offices) and staff from the WHO Regional Office.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- review progress on recommendations of the 2019 meeting;
- share experiences of WHO Collaborating Centres in supporting bioethics in the Region;
- discuss contributions to the upcoming global bioethics summit;
- share and discuss global initiatives on ethics and the COVID-19 response; and
- plan for the RERC's work during 2021 and beyond.

The meeting was co-chaired by Professor Mohamed Salah Ben Ammar (Tunisia) and Professor Gamal Serour (Egypt), while Dr Nino Dal Dayanghirang (WHO Regional Office) served as its rapporteur. Dr Arash Rashidian, Director of Science, Information and Dissemination, at the WHO Regional Office, inaugurated the meeting and welcomed participants.

2. Summary of discussions

Progress on implementation of the recommendations of the 2019 RERC meeting

Dr Ahmed Mandil (RERC Secretary/WHO Regional Office), shared with participants progress on implementation of the recommendations of the 2019 RERC meeting. He noted that WHO has two Collaborating Centres (WHO-CCs) on bioethics, namely the Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture (CEBEC) at the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation, Karachi, Pakistan, and the Medical Ethics and History of Medicine Research Center at Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran. The Salim El-Hoss Bioethics and Professionalism Program at the Faculty of Medicine and Medical Center of the American University of Beirut in Beirut, Lebanon, has been proposed as the third WHO-CC on bioethics in the Region. Currently, there are 12 institutions that comprise the global network of WHO-CCs for bioethics. Dr Mandil also highlighted the [second Eastern Mediterranean/Arab States regional summit of national ethics and bioethics committees](#) (15–16 December 2019) and the [ethics in implementation research workshop](#) held in the WHO Regional Office on 17 December 2019, in collaboration with WHO headquarters.

The RERC acknowledged the achievements made towards fulfilment of the recommendations of the [previous RERC meeting](#) held in 2019, noting there was room for further collaboration. In addition, the RERC recommended the wide dissemination of information about online WHO/UNESCO bioethics/research ethics courses in the Region, the provision of regional training of trainers courses on research ethics through online webinars, and updating the regional database of ethics committees.

IBC/COMEST Statement on COVID-19 and UNESCO Recommendations on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence

Dr Orio Ikebe (UNESCO headquarters) and Ms Jana El-Baba (UNESCO Arab States) presented on the International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), advisory bodies to UNESCO. These bodies issued a joint statement on “[COVID-19: ethical consideration from a global perspective](#)” on 6 April 2020. Regional messages were prepared and shared through the UNESCO website with the participation of RERC members Professor Michel Daher and Professor Mohamed Salah Ben Ammar. The presentation highlighted the ongoing two-year process to elaborate the [first global standard-setting instrument on the ethics of artificial intelligence](#) (AI). It was noted that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating the development and use of AI. Concrete, impact-oriented and innovative policy actions are proposed in the following areas: ethical impact assessment, ethical governance and stewardship, data policy, development and international cooperation, environment and ecosystems, gender, culture, education and research, economy and labour, health and social well-being.

The RERC recommended that national bioethics committees should be fostered in the Eastern Mediterranean Region/Arab States, along with regional and global bioethics summits and health professional education, curricula and capacity-building, in collaboration with WHO-CCs. Discussions also focused on other areas of common interest: publication ethics and intellectual property, working towards achieving the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to health and education, the Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well Being (especially Accelerator 6: research, development, access and innovation) and capacity-building in areas such as bioethics, research ethics, and emergency and migration ethics, among others.

WHO-CC experience in supporting bioethics: Global and regional perspectives

Professor Aamir Jafarey (Pakistan) explained that the Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture (CBEC), Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation, Pakistan, had been inaugurated in October 2004 and designated a WHO-CC for bioethics in August 2018. As an example of the Centre's global/international work, since 2016, the National Institute of Health has funded a training initiative between CBEC and the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), based in Nairobi, Kenya. As a WHO-CC, CBEC has faced some challenges, including in networking with other bioethics resources in the Region, communication on ongoing activities within other WHO-CCs and an overstretched CBEC faculty.

Ethics and COVID-19 randomized clinical trials: concepts and challenges

Dr Ehsan-Shamsi Gooshki (Islamic Republic of Iran) presented on the challenges faced during the pandemic in observing the standard processes of research. These include those related to the number of COVID-19 proposals to be reviewed, performing rapid scientific review for COVID-19 proposals, rapid registry of clinical trials, and approval for laboratory and animal studies. The related ethical issues include those regarding infrastructure, randomization, privacy and confidentiality, informed consent (especially in emergency and intensive care units) and the impact of social media on COVID-19 randomized control trials.

Global initiatives on ethics and the COVID-19 response

Dr Andreas Reis (WHO headquarters) presented on some key documents produced in support of the COVID-19 response. These included WHO guidance on the ethics of research, such as [Ethical](#)

standards for research during public health emergencies: distilling existing guidance to support COVID-19 R&D, Guidance for research ethics committees for rapid review of research during public health emergencies and *Key criteria for the ethical acceptability of COVID-19 human challenge studies*, as well as WHO guidance on the ethics of the pandemic response, such as *Ethical considerations to guide the use of digital proximity tracking technologies for COVID-19 contact tracing* and *Resource allocation and priority setting* (a policy brief). Some current committees were also described, including the Accelerator Ethics and Governance Working Group that has worked on the allocation of diagnostics and therapeutics, reviewed the data governance framework and developed a policy brief on placebo use in vaccine trials.

Global bioethics summits (2020/2021)

Professor Michel Daher (Lebanon) presented on global bioethics summits (2020–2021) and shared recommendations regarding the contribution of the Region to upcoming summits. The [13th Global Summit of National Bioethics Committees](#) was held on 9–11 September 2020 and was organized jointly by the Portuguese National Council of Ethics for the Life Sciences and WHO, in collaboration with UNESCO. The theme chosen for 2020 was “Health Care 4 All”.

Day one of the summit gathered key experts on the theme of “research and response to the pandemic outbreak: ethical issues, global perceptions”. The focus of day two was on “national ethics committees regional update: key issues raised by COVID-19”, with presentations made by institutions from two countries of the Region on Islamic Republic of Iran’s experiences in research ethics during COVID-19 and key ethical issues raised by COVID-19 in Lebanon.

Other issues and the way forward

Other issues discussed during the RERC meeting included the need to receive more information on the situation of research ethics in countries, improving the process of onboarding of new members of the RERC, improving the research ethics situation in north African Member States, the management of social media and ethics, updates on the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator (with a focus on ethics), assessing quality control of the outputs of ethics review committees in the Region, migration ethics, enhancing a bottom-up process for tackling emerging ethical issues, compassionate use, and improving regulation, with the support of better ethics observation/ethical reviews.

3. Recommendations

1. Support bioethics/research ethics work in the Region, including capacity-building via regional webinars and WHO/UNESCO online platforms and courses.
2. Maintain ethical review of WHO-funded proposals/protocols in the Region, as requested.
3. Network among WHO-CCs, ethics bodies and resources in the Region.
4. Support development and performance assessment of the work of ethics review committees.
5. Participate in and support WHO's global/regional committees on ethics and the COVID-19 response.
6. Foster work with UNESCO on bioethics and research ethics in the Region.
7. Support regional bioethics summits (WHO/UNESCO/RERC members).
8. Support collaboration between WHO-CCs and UNESCO Chairs in the Region.



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