



*Letter to the Editor*

## Challenges of research ethics committees

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The past two decades witnessed a colossal stride in scientific research in the academic community. As such, students and educators vibrantly carry out research activities either independently or collectively. Aside from ensuring quality scientific technical soundness, it becomes the responsibility of investigators to ensure that participants' rights are protected and that their safety is secured at all times.

Research ethics committees provide an additional oversight for the protection of human participants. Historically, the World Health Organization (WHO) has prominently recognized this role and has issued a document entitled *Standards and Operational Guidelines for the Ethics Review of Health-Related Research with Human Participants* which clearly defines the systems approach for the establishment of these committees.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) collaborated with the WHO and jointly issued the *International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans*.<sup>2</sup> The document provides ethical considerations for specific research scenarios, as well as a chapter on the requirements for the establishment of ethics committees, and guidelines for the conduct of reviewing protocols.

Locally, upon the enactment of the Philippine National Health Research System (PNHRS) Act of 2013, the Philippine Health Research Ethics Boards (PHREB) was appointed as the national policy-making body for health research.<sup>3</sup> Its legal mandate includes promoting the establishment

of research ethics committees as well as monitoring and evaluating their performance through an accreditation process. In the academe, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued a 2016 memorandum directing ethics committees in higher educational institutions to undergo registration and accreditation.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the extensive international and local frameworks, ethics committees face critical challenges in their organization, membership, and function. The establishment of the committee is an institutional decision oftentimes in compliance with existing regulatory requirements but less frequently as a genuine concern for the ethical conduct for research. This likewise holds true in the case of researchers who seek ethics approval primarily to comply with the requirements of funding institutions and of scientific journals for potential publication. Are these behaviors reflective of the erroneous and disturbing notion that scientific interest takes precedence over the welfare of human participants? If so, there is a crucial need to further transform an ethical research culture with patience and understanding that can only be processed over time.

The existence of a research ethics committee in the academe is a unique setting. To demonstrate, the academic institution is depended upon for providing the mandate and support for the committee. However, to prevent conflict of interests, the same institution does not take part in the committee's deliberations and decisions and is expected to respect the latter's

independence. It cannot, in any way, influence the decision-making process. This may be a potential conflict for both the institution and the committee considering the perceived divergence in their primary mission. That is, to generate scientific evidence for the former and to protect research participants for the latter. Have researchers become too engrossed in the practice, turning a blind eye on the mandated process for the protection of their participants? And for their part, have the ethics committees become too stringent in their manner of review, restraining the chance of generating new knowledge?

History has repeatedly taught us the painful lessons on the unethical conduct of research; when good researchers, even doctors, forgot to respect human dignity, to uphold autonomy, and to guard against injustice.<sup>5</sup> Let us not ignore the fact that ethical guidelines and research ethics committees came about as an aftermath of these unethical research behaviors.<sup>6,7</sup> Some researchers may perceive going through an ethics review process as inconvenient but it becomes an obligatory inconvenience if we are to uphold the protection of research participants. Albeit certification courses for the ethical conduct of research are required among researchers, the ethics committee's role is still vital and mandated by law.

For its part, the committee is expected to have a high level of expertise and integrity. Members go through extensive training and re-certifications in ethics education. Moreover, exhibiting high moral values and upholding research integrity are crucial inherent traits. Additionally, with the growing complexities of research designs, methodologies, and expansive research areas, it becomes mandatory that members also become updated on these technical areas. This is necessary to ensure a pertinent, expert, and efficient review process. Hence, capacity-building becomes obligatory. Lastly, members are committed to spending time and effort in the exercise of their role, often burdened with the increasing number of protocols needing review. All of these are over and above their main role in the university, that is, to teach in their professional fields. As such, there is difficulty in

the recruitment of a unique breed of members who will have the expertise and who can sustain the passion for the role.

The challenges remain. Ethics committees will continue to be confronted by issues as unique as the purpose that they serve. Hand in hand with the scientific community, they move towards parallel visions in improving the health of the society while remaining steadfast in their responsibility as guardians in ensuring safety among participants. In the end, both should aspire for the common good.

“Where people of goodwill get together and transcend their differences for the common good, peaceful and just solutions can be found even for those problems which seem most intractable.”  
Nelson Mandela

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