

Ethics committees for biomedical research in some Africa emerging countries

Jean-Paul Rwabihama (Rwanda).

Context: The conduct of medical researches led by Northern countries in developing countries raises ethical questions. The assessment of research protocols has to be twofold, with a first reading in the country of origin and a second one in the country where the research takes place. This reading should benefit from an independent local ethical review of protocols. Consequently, ethics committees for medical research are evolving in Africa.

Objective: To investigate the process of establishing ethics committees and their independence.

Method: Descriptive study of 25 African countries and 2 North American countries. Data were recorded by questionnaire and interviews. Two visits of ethics committee meetings were conducted on the ground: over a period of 3 months in Kigali (Rwanda) and 2 months in Washington DC (USA).

Results: Twenty-two countries participated in this study, 20 from Africa and 2 from North America. The response rate was 80 %. Seventy-five percent of local African committees developed into national ethics committees. During the last 5 years, these national committees have grown on a structural level. The circumstances of creation and the general context of underdevelopment remain the major challenges in Africa. Their independence could not be ensured without continuous training and efficient funding mechanisms. Institutional ethics committees are well established in USA and in Canada, whereas ethics committees in North America are weakened by the institutional affiliation of their members.

Conclusion: The process of establishing ethics committees could affect their functioning and compromise their independence in some African countries and in North America.

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