

Education and Training

Research ethics short course: Responsible conduct of research

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Health research, while a valued social activity, is fraught with complexities, especially where participant populations are convenient, easily accessible, and in the main, vulnerable. Researchers and research ethics committee (REC) members currently confront difficult moral, ethical and legal dilemmas when their work involves such populations. This is especially so in international research in developing regions where sponsors are from the developed world. Careful analysis and action has therefore become imperative regarding research conducted in this context.

In terms of section 73 of the National Health Act,¹ every institution, health agency and health establishment at which health research is conducted is required to establish or have access to a health REC registered with the National Health Research Ethics Council. The function of the REC is to review health research and grant approval where the research meets the required ethical standards. The Act defines health research very broadly to include:

‘... any research which contributes to knowledge of

- (a) the biological, clinical, psychological or social processes in human beings;
- (b) improved methods for the provision of health services;
- (c) human pathology;
- (d) the causes of disease;
- (e) the effects of the environment on the human body;

(f) the development or new application of pharmaceuticals, medicines and related substances; and

(g) the development of new applications of health technology.’

In line with the requirements of the National Health Act, the Steve Biko Centre for Bioethics at the University of the Witwatersrand conducts an annual intensive short course in research ethics. The objectives of this course are to expose researchers and REC members to current issues and critical thinking in health research in an effort to promote their development as researchers and reviewers who are competent in issues of ethics in research, and to familiarise REC members with the ethics review process. Ethical complexities that arise with the use of animals in research and training, and scientific misconduct, are also covered in the course.

The course is outcomes-based and extends over a period of 5-days. Candidates who successfully complete the evaluation component of the course are awarded a University of the Witwatersrand Certificate of Competence. The course will next be run from 20 to 24 February 2012. Enquiries should be directed to Diana.govender@wits.ac.za.

Reference

1. National Health Act No. 61 of 2003.