



Research ethics is an encounter between 'I' & the 'Other'

Kausar S Khan

Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan

Context

Research ethics is often taught by introducing the four basic principles of autonomy, justice, beneficence and non-maleficence and utilizing case studies that highlight these principles. Invariably, this approach focuses on ensuring the protection of research subjects from harm and what benefits they may accrue. Respect for research subject is acknowledged and informed consent discussed as a means of ensuring the respect for person through consent, as if consent is the only doorway for respect. This approach simplifies research ethics by overlooking the complexities in which research ethics is shrouded. The sub-themes thus overlooked are: purpose of the research; balancing knowledge and rights of research subject; recognition of research subject having a web of social relations; and importantly, the nature of relationship that is established between the researcher and the research subject and those connected with the research subject (i.e. family members; power blocks within the community who may influence the individual and/or family).

Reason for the idea

A short course titled Epidemiology, Biostatistics & Surveillance was offered by the Continuing Education Program of Aga Khan University (AKU). The course director felt that besides scientific contents of the course should be supplemented by bioethics, as the application of the course contents need to be undertaken ethically. The two-hour sessions was designed to engage with the often under-represented, theme of research ethics.

Methods

The method included two salient features: the learning approach, and the sequence of contents. The former was guided by the constructivist approach to learning, and thereby facilitated the learners to engage with a group of key ideas; and collective learning processes were maintained;. The sequence of session contents, whereby the four principles of research ethics were presented after

participants had arrived at a collective understanding of the relationship between a researcher as 'I' and the research subjects as the 'other'. The notion of the 'other' was also deconstructed to highlight the wide range of 'others' – the family members of the research subject; significant persons in the community of the research subjects; other members of the research team, especially those on the lower rungs of research hierarchy; and the scientific community.

Evaluation

At the end of the session participants were requested, by the facilitator, to give feedback. They said, they have realized: research ethics is about making ethical all interactions between the researcher and the 'other'; researchers should have courage to abide by ethical principles; should know their assumptions about others and their own socially constructed biases; and should have good communication skills. Moreover, while moral autonomy of the researcher is important, moral responsibilities of the institution/organization to which the research belongs cannot be ignored The workshop was thus successful in delivering these key messages Formal evaluation required scoring on a scale of 1 – 5, with 5= outstanding; 4= excelled;3= good; and 2=fair; and 1 = poor; unsatisfactory. Participants' rating was: 5 rated outstanding; 11 rated Excellent; and one rated good. (Epidemiology,

Reference

1. Jacquineau A, Stuart R. Principilism, medical individualism, and health promotion in resource-poor countries: can autonomy-based bioethics promote social justice and population health? *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*, 2010; 5: 1. DOI: 10.1186/1747-5341-5-1.
2. Roberto R, David B. *Research Ethics Training Curriculum*, Second Edition. USAID & FHI 360, USA. 2009

© Medical Education Department, School of Medical Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. All rights reserved.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Kausar S Khan, Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University, P O Box 3500, Karachi. Pakistan. Email: kausar.skhan@aku.edu