



First African Conference for Administrators of Research Ethics Committees (AAREC) Report

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The COHRED Group



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AAREC	African Conference for Administrators Research Ethics Committees
COHRED	Council on Health Research for Development
EDCTP	European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership
GFHR	Global Forum for Health Research
HR Web	Health Research Web
MRAs	Medicines Regulatory Authorities
MARC	Mapping African Research Ethics Review and Medicines Regulatory Capacity
NEC	National Ethics Committee
NHREC	National Health Research Ethics Committee
PI	Principal Investigator
RECA	Research Ethics Committee Administrator
REC	Research Ethics Committee
SARETI	South African Research Ethics Training Initiative
SOPs	Standard Operational Procedures
IMS	Information Management System

Key Messages from the Conference

1) Training

Participants highlighted the need to have a training body in Africa that would draft a curriculum, and offer continued professional development and accreditation of RECs.

2) Information management systems

There was consensus on the paramount need for acquiring information management systems for RECs. The latter will reduce RECs' workloads, cut down the review period and improve quality and efficiency of RECs. This will also save researchers' time, resources and speed up implementation of research results.

3) Need for funding

Participants expressed the need for soliciting funds through partnership leading to sustainability in the areas of financial and technical support and training.

4) Independence of RECs

The notion of autonomous governance was embraced with emphasis on ability of RECs to make decisions independently, appoint well trained and competent office bearers and members, set performance criteria, and have independent budgets, office space and adequate equipment, resulting in well-resourced RECs.

5) Professionalize Research Ethics Committee Administrators' positions:

AAREC participants called for professionalisation of the Research Ethics Committee Administrator position. Minimum requirements for training a RECA and specific job descriptions/profiles were outlined. Additionally, a well-defined career development pathway was advocated for.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Efforts to strengthen the capacity of research ethics committees in Africa have, to date, targeted research ethics committee (RECs) chairs and members, without a focus on the research ethics committee administrators (RECA), who manage the RECs and are responsible for facilitating the review process, supporting capacity strengthening, and developing norms and standards for best practice in ethics review.

To bridge this gap, the first African conference for Administrators of Research Ethics Committees (AAREC) was organized by MARC (Mapping African Research Ethics Review and Drug Regulation Capacity), an EDCTP (European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership) funded project, which is a collaboration between the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) and the South African Research Ethics Training Initiative (SARETI). This meeting was financially supported by the Global Bank through a grant to the Global Forum for Health Research.

Forty RECA from twenty-one African countries convened in Kasane, Botswana on 26th – 28th September 2011. AAREC sought to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the essential roles played by REC administrators, and to establish a collaborative approach to strengthening the capacity and competence of African RECA. The theme of the conference was, “Striving for Quality and Efficiency of Ethical Review of Health Research in Africa”.

The main objectives were to increase understanding of the essential roles of RECA, address their resource needs and constraints, share best practices, brainstorm on standardization of REC operational procedures, and raise awareness on ways of mobilizing appropriate support and resources for RECA.

Major issues affecting RECA included an undefined career path, inadequate training opportunities, poor incentives, weak sustainability, and poorly defined and undervalued roles, lack of autonomy, inefficiency due to weak information management systems and lack of access to independent information e.g. lack of internet access, and funding. Recommended solutions were categorized as short, mid and long-term.

The conference confirmed that well-trained, competent and job secure RECA are an essential element of research ethics review systems. RECA's position is central and should be highly visible institutionally, given the importance of the links between ethical health research and health systems development in Africa. The meeting endorsed a call for more support to strengthen the ' capacity of the RECA, develop a process for the accreditation of all African RECA and harmonisation of the ethical review system.

The challenges outlined above call for urgent interventions towards investing in capacity building efforts and web-based information management solutions to improve the quality of ethical review and the efficiency of African RECA.

Key Words: African conference for administrators of research ethics committees, research ethics, information management system, research ethics committee administrators, research ethics committees.

1.0 Introduction

Research is essential to improving health, equity and development. In the past several years, there has been widespread discussion on the conduct of health research in developing countries. Much of the concern was focussed on strengthening the capacity of the ethics committees which are widely managed by RECAs, hence it is imperative that attention be paid to the administrative capacity of the African RECAs.

Currently, over 155 RECs are known to be operating across Africa – with great variability in skills, membership, and efficiency (<http://www.researchethicsweb.org/>).

At this moment, it seems that the bottleneck to increased throughput and quality review is probably as a result of under-resourced REC administration, rather than the ethical review competence of committees. This is especially the case as there are few resources and little training opportunities for RECAs.

The AAREC was organized in this context – a first in Africa – with the aim of bringing together REC administrators to seek and facilitate a comprehensive understanding of their essential roles and to establish a collaborative approach to strengthen and improve their capacity and competence. A fitting theme, “Striving for Quality and Efficiency of Ethical Review of Health Research in Africa,” was chosen for this conference.

2.0 Objectives of the conference

The main objectives were to:

- Increase understanding of the essential roles of RECAs.
- Address RECAs’ resource needs and constraints, and to share best practices.
- Brainstorm on the standardisation of REC operational procedures.
- Raise awareness on ways of mobilising appropriate support and resources.

3.0 Conference process

A systematic “open space¹ process was utilised at the conference to harness African RECAs’ expertise and experiences in identifying key challenges and soliciting solutions. The conference overview included short introductory presentations covering the MARC project, a presentation on current EDCTP calls for ethics grants, and a presentation on a proposed web-based REC information management system.

1. In open space meetings, participants define the agenda with a relatively rigorous process, and may adjust it as the meeting proceeds. The agenda is open and participants raise key issues for discussion and then divide up into fluid groups. All issues raised are thus addressed by those participants most qualified. All of the most important ideas, recommendations, conclusions, questions for further study, and plans for immediate action are documented in one comprehensive report. (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology)

4.0 Key issues and recommended solutions

The following key issues were identified as major challenges, and the proposed solutions were ranked on a scale of short, mid and long term.

ISSUE	SHORT TERM	MID TERM	LONG TERM
<p>4.1 Lack of / inadequate financial resources dedicated to strengthening capacity of RECA's</p> <p>Negatively impacts on human resources and infrastructure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charge review fees (charge fixed charges or % of grants) • Ensure that there is funding dedicated to strengthening capacity of RECA's. • Strategic budgeting • Develop strategies to increase institutional awareness of RECA's' financial needs and other administrative staff capacity building • Conduct in-house training rather than engaging consultants • Produce an AAREC publication, which can be used as motivation by institutions to support their funding/ grant applications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source external funding • Include RECA's capacity building in the institutional /departmental budget • Embark on income generating activities – such as conducting courses or workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request for institutional financial support • Establish private and public partnerships • Embark on grant driven projects • Develop RECA's capacity in in grant proposal writing skills • Charge review fees
<p>4.2 Lack of incentives and sustainability for RECA's</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for recognition of RECA's and incentives at national and international level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accreditation process for African RECA's • Conduct accreditation needs assessments for RECA's in Africa 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish national regulatory body to coordinate accreditation and serve as an advocacy body • Advocate for income generating activities and establish

ISSUE	SHORT TERM	MID TERM	LONG TERM
<p>4.3 Inadequate training opportunities:</p> <p>Inadequate initial and continuing education opportunities for RECA's negatively impacts on execution of duties.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify ongoing training programmes Link the programmes to a central website i.e. MARC / HRweb Facilitate exchange of information through the use of MARC social network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct training needs assessments for RECA's Mobilise resources and funding for training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop training curriculum to meet the identified needs
<p>4.4 Lack of career path:</p> <p>Concerns were raised regarding the lack of a clear career path in research ethics administration, with consequent job and position ambiguities leading to role overlaps between secretaries, administrators, REC members and chairpersons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate the job description of RECA's into existing institutional scheme of service and salary scales Advocate for full-time and permanent RECA positions Plan for the establishment of a steering committee /secretariat to drive the process of co-coordinating the development and running of an African RECA association (this secretariat could rotate from country to country) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Source external funding for training of RECA's from various funding agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish an organisation that can oversee training, advocacy and accreditation of RECA's and RECS. Existence of a functional steering committee
<p>4.5 Unclear roles of RECA's</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benchmark and define job description 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusion and recognition of the RECA position in the national / institutional establishment register 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RECA specific job description

ISSUE	SHORT TERM	MID TERM	LONG TERM
<p>4.6 Lack of independence/autonomy of RECs resulting in inappropriate legal status for RECs to carry out their administrative activities impacting on decision making</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify model countries with independent RECs • Draft the process of autonomous governance • Involve institutional key decision makers in the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benchmark and train RECs on autonomous governance and document the process • Delineate roles of autonomous national ethics committees /RECs • Encourage networking among RECs and stakeholders to buy in to short term goals • Lobby to change laws • Capacity building workshops to assist countries in drafting proposals (pertaining to REC's autonomy) to be submitted to governments/institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disseminate draft of the proposed autonomous governance process • Implement the process and assist the RECs to make the regulatory process effective. • Monitor and evaluate the process •
<p>4.7 Inefficiency of RECs due weak Information Management Systems (IMS)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a technical reference team to conduct a needs assessment to determine the weaknesses in the information management systems used by the RECs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a functional low-cost sustainable IMS package • Work closely with the developers to refine and pilot the system • Train RECs in the use of information management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the IMS to all RECs in Africa to ensure consistency and facilitation of information exchange.

5.0 Conclusion

The key outcome from the deliberations at AAREC underlined the critical need to recognise RECAs' career path and position as a distinct entity and their vital role within the ethical review system.

The conference committed to working together towards strengthening the capacity of RECAs through training, assisting RECs to gain financial independence to cater for the financial needs of RECAs like providing incentives , advocating for autonomy of RECs to enable RECAs participate in decision making, promote exchange of expertise and information among RECAs and establishment of an accreditation process.

Most importantly, there is an urgent need to develop and implement a cost-effective web based REC information management tool which would empower RECAs to provide accelerated improvement of the quality and efficiency of ethical review systems in Africa. This in turn will promote ethical health research to improve health systems and health in Africa.

6.0 Way Forward

AAREC marked the beginning of a process to strengthen the capacity of RECAs and RECs in Africa. The conference highlighted the crucial role of RECAs in the research ethics review system. It is thus important to focus attention and resources on understanding their roles and position, and to develop strategies to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. A positive way forward is the implementation of the above suggested solutions, especially investing in training, electronic information management systems and organising follow-up consultative meetings.

Appendix 1: AAREC Participants List

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