

ETHICAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH PROPOSALS IN KHYBER MEDICAL COLLEGE: AN EYE OPENER

It was the last Thursday of the month and being a member of our institute's (Khyber Medical College/Khyber Teaching Hospital) Institutional Research and Ethical Review Board (IREB), I was attending the meeting. As usual, various research proposals were discussed; some were accepted and some sent for revision. Majority of proposals belonged to postgraduate trainees working in different clinical disciplines. It was during that session that I had a "Penny-Drop Moment", an epiphany. Me and the other members including our chairman have noticed that the quality of research proposals presented by the postgraduate students of College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan (CPSP) are not of adequate standards. It was evident from the proposals that research in public sector hospital is not focusing on implementation of health programs and their operational challenges. Research in surgical specialties has lost focus on quality clinical trials and students are presenting low quality descriptive studies. The basic science researchers lean on clinical fields, as exploring the basic anatomy, physiology and molecular biology seems like a herculean task.

The studies being conducted were of very low quality and focused on clinical audits and frequency of different diseases. Among the studies discussed, few included "finding frequency of hypokalemia in gastroenteritis" and "finding frequency of anemia in COPD patients". Majority of (about 65) research proposals' titles started with the word "frequency" during the past 2 years of my experience in these meetings. Moreover, studies are directed towards counting the diseases or conditions in individuals rather than exploring the pathophysiology and management aspects of these. No one is interested in the "How" but everyone is chasing the "how many". Probably because the "How" is a harder target to hit, most likely due to lack of research culture in our institutes.

The trinity of research involves the researcher, the journal and the ethical review board. It is the responsibility of the researcher to attain the ethical approval certificate before commencement of research.¹ The ethical boards

need to scrutinize the proposal both technically and ethically before acceptance. And lastly, the journals need to make sure that they demand an ethical certificate from the corresponding author at the time of submission of manuscript. A glitch in any of these three may lead to a poor quality product.

So the Institutional Research and Ethical Review Board members had a discussion regarding this issue and we tried to look at the causes. The leading factor, everyone agreed to, was; lack of training in research conduction. Although, the CPSP conducts a mandatory research workshop for trainees,². But the question arises. Is 2-3 days of research training enough? Moreover, trainees of some of the specialties like Gynaecology and Obstetrics are overworked. So due to time constraints, it becomes difficult to come up with good quality research what to say about the research expertise of supervisors. Another reason is the lack of funding on part of the institutes. The trainees and faculty get no financial support whatsoever for completing their research. Hence, research is only done for the sake of fulfilling the CPSP requirements towards obtaining the fellowship and ultimately the standard of research is compromised.

The amusing part here is not only the research conduction but it has come to knowledge of board that, most of the trainees don't even know that after writing a proposal the initial step is to get approval from ethical board. They seek IREB approval after full proposal acceptance by CPSP; hence, leaving the board with no other choice but to accept the proposal due to limitations of stay of postgraduate students in a teaching hospital.

Among the solutions, one can be to increase training duration of workshops on "research conduction ethics and methodology" for all the researchers particularly the trainees, or to probably conduct 2-3 detailed workshops on the same topic. Another solution is to allocate funds for research projects in a competitive manner. Setting up of a much strict standards by CPSP for research conduction can also be an option utilized to promote research. Probably what we need is, something like the Flexner's report of 1910, which suggested to incorporate the scientific research as an essential component of medical curriculum in USA.³

Pakistan Medical Research Council (PMRC) now known as the Pakistan Health Research Council (PHRC) was established more than 55 years ago in order to patronize, promote and fund medical research in Pakistan.⁴

Correspondence

Dr. Umema Zafar

Assistant Professor in Physiology, Khyber Medical College, Peshawar - Pakistan.

Email: umema.com@gmail.com

Contact: +92-91-9221384

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But it has yet to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) regarding health and in particular research in health which will eventually affect the plan of action to eradicate polio and HIV; to reduce maternal and child mortality; and to curb the outbreak of infectious diseases.⁵ It does offer funding up to 200,000 rupees to individual researchers on competitive basis; however, the criteria and proper advertisement is yet to reach the ordinary researchers. And the whole process is so cumbersome that majority of researchers prefer spending from their own pockets on projects or doing low quality research.

In conclusion, whatever may be the cause a little more effort on part of the researchers, cooperation from the institutes and patronage by the government can solve the issues plaguing research in our region.

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Umema Zafar

Department of Physiology, Khyber Medical College,
Peshawar - Pakistan.