Ethical Approval in Nepal: Barriers or Facilitators?

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ABSTRACT

Any research involving human participants requires review and approval from an authorized research ethics committee to safeguard participant's rights, dignity and welfare while ensuring the scientific validity of the research. Ethical approval is mandatory before initiating or ecruiting study participants. It is also a prerequisite for publishing research findings in scientific journals contributing to ensuring the quality of scientific knowledge.

The ethical review process focuses on the assessment of potential risks to the participants as well as the research team focusing on how such risks are identified, minimized and managed.

This paper provides an overview of the Nepal Health Research Councils ethical review and approval process for both national and international researchers intending to conduct health research in Nepal. Despite this, the Nepalese ethics committee and researcher face several challenges, including limited awareness of responsible conduct of research, limited training opportunities, unclear clinical trial guidelines, bureaucratic hurdles, and frequent staff

turnover in research governance.

This paper highlights these challenges and aims to support both researchers and the Ethics Committee in promoting the responsible conduct of health research in Nepal.

Keywords: Ethical issues; ethical review and approval; Nepal and research.

INTRODUCTION

The ethical review and approval process is a fundamental component of responsible conduct of research involving human participants, ensuring the protection of their rights, safety, and well-being. This process has become central to health research ethics, receiving global attention since the Second World War and is acknowledged in all major declarations and guidelines. The Nuremberg Code, developed in response to unethical experiments conducted during World War II[1], emphasized and established key ethical principles such as voluntary participation, informed consent, and protection of research participants from harm.[2] These principles laid the foundation for modern research ethics frameworks

Similarly, the Declaration of Helsinki (DoH) adopted in 1964 by the World Medical Association, expanded on these principles by emphasizing respect for individual autonomy, confidentiality, and privacy. It also introduced the protection of vulnerable populations and advocated for transparency in research methods and accurate reporting in medical publications.[3] The ultimate goal of these ethical principles and guidelines is to prevent misconduct, promote scientific integrity, and ensure that research is conducted with the highest ethical standards to protect study participants from harm .[4]

REQUIREMENT OF ETHICAL REVIEW AND APPROVAL

Ethical review committees set research standards based on national needs and regulations, and universally recognized ethical principles such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and respect for the environment.5 Before contacting participants researcher must obtain ethical approval, which is based on the risk associated with the study as defined by national ethical standards and the decision made by the ethical review committee. This approval is mandatory for research involving human subjects. A common query among researchers is whether indirect experiments involving human subjects require ethical approval. These can be categorized into two primary types: using human biological specimens from

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laboratories and employing human-related data, such as secondary data analysis or hospital records.

According to the National Ethical Guidelines for Health Research in Nepal 2022, ethical review and approval are mandatory for research involving direct human participation to safeguard data confidentiality and participant privacy. However, ethical approval is not required for already published data, such as further analysis of the Nepal Demographic Health Survey, since such sources are considered public domain data.

A common query among researchers is whether local ethical approval is necessary if it has already been approved by a foreign ethical review committee. Some researchers believe it is unnecessary, often due to past instances of experiments conducted without local ethical permission. As Teijlingen et al have observed, such assumptions may stem from ignorance or overconfidence regarding international ethical norms. However, it is essential to obtain approval from a local ethical committee even when prior approval has been granted abroad.6 Local ethical approval ensures that the research adherence to the specific ethical standards, regulations and cultural considerations of the host country, thereby protecting the rights and welfare of local participants.

OBTAINING ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) serves as the research regulatory authority responsible for granting ethical approval for health research to be conducted in Nepal. Researchers working on collaborative projects with external funding must undergo the Ethical Review process of the Ethical Review Board (ERB) of the Nepal Health Research Council in response to its mandate to approve all research in health in the country. Ethical Review Board at NHRC was established in 2001 and received accreditation from Forum for Ethical Review Committees of Asia Pacific (FERCAP) in 2019.

The NHRC Guidelines, research funded by Nepalese funding institutions with budgets up to NPR 5 lakhs can be reviewed and approved by Institutional Review Committees (IRCs) accredited by the NHRC. There are 60 IRCs actively operating across the country, located in academic institutions, hospitals, and healthcare professional institutions. These IRCs are authorized to approve research projects to be conducted by faculty, staff, and students, and if the study is planned to be carried out within the same institutions by undergraduate and postgraduate students from any University in Nepal. However, certain research projects require mandatory approval from the ERB, NHRC. These include nationwide studies, multi-centre research, externally sponsored studies, and clinical trials.

The ethical review and approval process typically takes four to six weeks to complete provided all required documents are submitted according to the checklist. Therefore, researchers are advised to submit their proposals to the ERB, NHRC well in advance to ensure timely approval.

APPLYING FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

Since January 2017, the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) has implemented an online system for the submission and review of research proposals, enhancing the efficiency and transparency of the ethical review and approval process. Hard copy submissions are no longer accepted. Researchers can submit their proposals online at (http://www.erb.nhrc.gov.np). The online ethics application form requires comprehensive details about the research project, including information about the research team, affiliation details, curriculum vitae, photos, signatures, and training certificates. Additionally, the form necessitates declarations of Conflict of Interest (CoI), study introduction and rationale, objectives, research methodology, data collection techniques, data analysis plan, ethical considerations, informed consent forms (including an assent form for minors), data collection tools and techniques, an acceptance letters from the research sites, a recommendation letter from the supervisor (for students thesis), and a funding agreement letter (for funded research). The NHRC ERB may request any additional documents if needed. Researchers are advised to provide complete information to avoid processing delays.

The online proposal submission and evaluation system has significantly streamlined the submission and review ecosystem, enabling quicker proposal submissions and reviewer feedback. Researchers can submit their proposals and receive feedback from reviewers more promptly, thereby facilitating the process and enhancing efficiency. The system's capability to store all submitted proposals and reviewer comments also promotes transparency in the review process. The adoption of online methods for proposal submission and review is highly appreciated by both national and international researchers markedly improving the efficiency of obtaining ethical approval for research projects.

FOR FOREIGN INVESTIGATORS

The Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) requires that all research projects involving a foreign investigator include at least one Nepalese Principal Investigator, with relevant training qualifications and experiences.7

Firstly; it provides an opportunity for Nepalese researchers to collaborate with and learn from experienced foreign researchers thereby fostering capacity building and knowledge transfer. This collaboration strengthens the country's research culture through mentorship and shared experience and expertise.

Secondly, this mandate ensures that research is conducted with sensitivity to Nepal's local context and culture. Nepalese investigators bring valuable insights into local socio-cultural and logistical challenges. This ensures that the research design and implementation are context-sensitive, improving the study's relevance and acceptability among local communities

Thirdly, involving local researchers supports the continuity of the research initiatives beyond the project's completion. It also ensures that research activities and their benefits continue beyond the involvement of foreign investigators, promoting enduring impact and development within the country.

Overall, this mandate not only supports sustainable research initiatives but also enhances the research quality, ethical compliance and long-term benefits by integrating local expertise with international collaboration.

FOR CLINICAL TRIALS

In Nepal, clinical trials involving novel medications, vaccines, devices, or investigational pharmaceutical products are subjected to stringent regulation. In addition to ERB approval, researchers must obtain permission from the Department of Drug Administration (DDA) to conduct such clinical trials. Additionally, they are required to establish a trial steering committee and Data Safety and Monitoring Board (DSMB) to oversee the trial.8

The DDA is the primary regulatory body responsible for providing permission to new medications or investigational products for use in clinical trials. It meticulously reviews the clinical trial protocol and associated documents to ensure the safety of the investigational product. Upon approval by the ERB and additional permission from the cabinet is required for vaccine trials, upon permission is granted by the Cabinet, the DDA grants permission to import investigational products for trial purposes. This regulatory framework ensures that clinical trials in Nepal adhere to stringent standards of safety, ethics, and scientific rigor, safeguarding the well-being of trial participants and upholding the integrity of research outcomes.

Certain fundamental prerequisites for clinical trials include the formation of a Data Safety and Monitoring Board(DSMB), conducting community engagement, adequate research infrastructure, and well-defined participant protection as outlined in National Ethical Guidelines and adhering to Good Clinical Practice (GCP) standards.

The DSMB, composed of independent experts, monitors participant safety, reviews trial data and has the authority to recommend protocol modifications or trial termination if participant welfare is compromised.

BARRIERS OR FACILITATORS

The National Ethical Guidelines for Health Research in Nepal, first published in 2001 and subsequently revised in 2005, 2011; 2019; and most recently in 2022, provide comprehensive guidance on conducting ethically responsible research and obtaining necessary approval. Despite these clear standards, researchers frequently face challenges due to limited familiarity with the guidelines. Adhering to the guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) could resolve most issues, yet some researchers submit incomplete proposals missing essential elements and necessitating further revisions that prolong the approval process.

Furthermore, researchers occasionally fail to address reviewer comments promptly, possibly due to confusion or other factors. If researchers fail to respond for six months are marked as pending. If the researcher wants to continue the same study are required to resubmit the proposal for further processing. In addition to these challenges, there are obstacles the institutional limitations such as frequent and high staff turnover and problems of retention of trained personnel contribute to delays. Similarly, researchers continue to encounter difficulties navigating the platform, underscoring the need for ongoing user training and system enhancements.

Delays in the ethical review process can impact researchers' ability to complete the studies on time. The review process often requires input from various governmental departments or sections. If these entities are slow to respond, the researcher may experience

prolonged waiting periods, sometimes leading them to withdraw their proposal altogether. Another significant challenge is the limited availability of reviewers in certain specialized research areas. This scarcity can cause further delays, as obtaining expert evaluations becomes difficult. While the NHRC has estabilished a standard review timeline of 4-6 weeks, reviews can extend beyond three months due to these constraints, affecting the overall research timeline.

CONCLUSIONS

Health-related studies involving human subjects in Nepal require prior ethical approval from ERB NHRC and/ or its accredited IRCs. However, nationwide studies, multi-centric research, externally funded projects, and clinical trials require mandatory approval from ERB, NHRC. Additionally, Clinical trials involving new medications, vaccines, and investigational pharmaceutical products require permission from the DDA.

The implementation of the NHRC's online proposal submission and review system has made the ethical review process more efficient, faster and transparent. The international recognition of the ERB by the Forum for Ethical Review Committee in the Asia Pacific Region (FERCAP) has further strengthened its global standing. By understanding these ethical review processes, national and international researchers can better prepare their proposals, ensuring compliance with both national and international research standards while conducting research in Nepal. Together, we can transform the research review ecosystem by fostering collaboration, enhancing transparency and strengthening the capacity of the ethical review committees. NHRC is also continuously working on enhancing the capacity of the ethics committee, by regularly organizing training, expanding the use of digital platforms, engaging the active participation of stakeholders and updating the ethical guidelines.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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