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By Doris Schroeder

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Putting an end to ethics dumping

Doris Schroeder explains how a recently published global code of conduct for research in resource-poor settings could help end the practice of scientists going abroad to do research that would not be permitted at home.

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On 15 May 2018, the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings was launched by an international consortium funded by the European Commission.

The Ethics and Research Integrity Sector, European Commission, intends to propose the code as a reference document for future research projects seeking funding under the European Union's framework programmes for research and innovation. In the current framework programme, Horizon 2020, almost €80 billion are to be spent on research from 2014 to 2020.

The code is particularly important for low- and middle-income countries, given their continued potential for exploitation. By contrast to existing codes, it concentrates only on the potentially highly sensitive situation when researchers from high-income settings undertake work in LMICs. And it applies to all disciplines.

While most researchers show integrity when working abroad, the risk of "ethics dumping" exists. Ethics dumping is the export of research practices that would not be acceptable in high-income regions to low- and middle-income countries. Research that would be prohibited or severely restricted in a high-income country is then carried out in a setting with lower regulatory capacity.

Some ethics dumping cases make big headlines; for example, the



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case of a European researcher who undertook research on non-human primates in Kenya, which European guidelines forbade.

Other ethics dumping cases have no or only a low media potential and this increases the likelihood that such cases will reoccur. For instance, the lack of insurance in clinical trials to cover for potential harm of research participants or the undertaking of research without ethics approval.

The former means that research participants incur a harm when supporting the progress of science for all and are then left to fend for themselves. This is, of course, particularly ethically worrying when they do not have access to quality health care as standard, which is likely if they were recruited from a low- or middle-income setting.

The latter means that research goes ahead side-stepping a proven governance mechanism to protect research participants from exploitation. Research ethics committees have been employed for over half a century now, and whilst there may be criticism about individual features of the system, especially in LMICs, there is currently no alternative.

Giving it teeth

Codes of conduct that are compulsory on certain professions or for recipients of funding from given sources are one way to avoid the violation of ethical standards. They are therefore also suitable to avoid ethics dumping.

In the new GCC, 23 articles ensure that equitable research partnerships are built between high-income and low- and middle-income settings. Some articles are substantial—for instance, commenting on the non-acceptance of bribery—whilst others are procedural, requiring that a clear mechanism for feedback, complaints or allegations of misconduct is available, which can also be accessed by illiterate or impoverished research participants.

Ethics dumping is unlikely to stop just because a code is launched, however. Research has shown that ethics codes in themselves are not effective, unless they nurture a culture of integrity. Only when researchers are committed to integrity, avoiding unethical shortcuts, can ethics codes be successful.

To assist in making codes successful, carrots and sticks can be employed. Funding agencies are important agents in the fight against ethics dumping, given their contractual powers. Obtaining funding is an excellent incentive or carrot for researchers.

By hopefully becoming a reference document for those in receipt of EU-funding, familiarity with the GCC will be expected from anybody proposing to work in a low- or middle-income environment. And adding the stick of ethical monitoring by European Commission agencies would achieve high compliance rates.

The drafters of the code, a highly diverse group of researchers, civil society, non-governmental organisations representing vulnerable populations, policy advisors, industry representatives and research funders hope that many researchers will use the code and provide feedback on its usefulness via the website.

If that happens, the code would become an instrument to catalyse a global collaborative effort to achieve higher ethical standards around the world and to avoid ethics dumping.

Doris Schroeder is the director of the University of Central Lancashire's Centre for Professional Ethics. She dedicates this article in honour of South Africa's Reverend Mario Mahongo, a leader of the San people of Southern Africa and co-drafter of the code, who tragically and unexpectedly died three days before he was meant to co-launch the code in Stockholm.

Image: Doris Schroeder

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