

# Promoting health research governance in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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The WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) has 22 countries and territories with an estimated population of 700 million (1). The region faces health and humanitarian emergencies of unprecedented scale that include armed conflicts and devastating impact of climate change, which make more than 40% of the population to require humanitarian assistance (2). The EMR also comprises 64% of the world's refugees (3).

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (WHO/EMRO), through a series of studies, has mapped existing health research and health research institutions in the 22 countries of the region (4–8). Out of 575 institutions contacted, 223 (38.3%) responded, and 57% of the respondents reported providing research-related capacity-building. More than half of the institutions reported having an ethics board in the areas of medicine, public health, health systems, and allied health sciences. Lack of awareness among policymakers of the importance of research governance was reported as a key challenge in conducting sound research (4). Other challenges were limited external and internal funding for research, lack of a sustainable research grants management system and mismatch between funding opportunities and priorities (4).

Although all the EMR countries reported conducting human subject research, only a few of them had national ethics guidelines for biomedical research. Most countries probably relied, for guidance, on the standard international guidance documents such as the International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans by the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (9), the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki) Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (10), or the WHO Code of Conduct for Responsible Research (11). This lack of specific national ethics guidelines could cause disparities in ethics practices, and this is a significant concern.

Health research governance plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the best ethical practices are applied during

biomedical research to safeguard the rights of research participants and ensure that the research output is of high quality and relevant to the community's needs.

A situation analysis of research ethics governance in Pakistan reported that there was no accurate information regarding the existence of ethics review committees in Pakistan and no national registry or accreditation process (12). The analysis identified the need for national guidelines for ethics governance in Pakistan and recommended a process for accreditation of ethics review committees to ensure and maintain the integrity of the ethics governance structure. The analysis further recommended an assessment of ethics governance in other EMR countries to provide an authentic overview of the health research structures in the region (12).

Another aspect that requires urgent action in the EMR is increasing general awareness of bioethics, with emphasis on research and public health ethics. We cannot ensure human subject protection without raising awareness among researchers, policymakers and governance stakeholders of the rights of research participants. They need to know how to ensure the integrity of their research and research agenda and this is only possible through contextual education in various aspects of bioethics.

The EMR currently hosts 3 of the WHO bioethics collaborating centres: Centre for Biomedical Ethics and Culture at the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation in Karachi, Pakistan; Medical Ethics and History of Medicine Research Centre at Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran; and Salim El-Hoss Bioethics and Professionalism Program at the American University of Beirut and Medical Centre, Beirut, Lebanon (13–15). Although each of these centres primarily offers educational opportunities in bioethics, there is a need to make such training opportunities available across the region to enhance bioethics education.

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