

Assessment of the operational characteristics of Research Ethics Committees in Ghana

Samuel Asiedu Owusu¹, Grace Addison², Barbara Redman³, Lisa Kearns³, Paul Amuna⁴, Amos Laar²

¹University of Cape Coast, Ghana, ² University of Ghana, Ghana, ³New York University Grossman School of Medicine, United States of America, ⁴University of Health and Allied Sciences, Ghana.

1. Introduction

The first two Research Ethics Committees (RECs) in Ghana were set up in 2000 (GHAAREC, 2015) and at the end of 2019, eighteen of them were operating independently in the country. Most studies conducted on RECs in Africa have largely focused on capacity development and training of their members (Bain et al., 2019). Some questions are yet to be empirically documented especially as they relate to the operational characteristics of RECs in Ghana. For instance, are the RECs operating with approved and functional SOPs and do they have the basic infrastructure and adequate funding to support the implementation of their activities? This study was an effort to fill this gap and modelled on a previous study conducted by Silverman et al (2015).

Materials and Methods

Using a mixed-method approach, we collected primary data from nine (50%) of the RECs that were operating in Ghana as at December 2019. We gathered qualitative data from the chairpersons of two RECs (one university- and the other hospital-based) who were purposefully selected for in-depth interviews while quantitative data was obtained from eight RECs through questionnaire administration. The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics while the framework analysis was adopted to analyse the qualitative data. Ethical clearance was obtained from two RECs before the commencement of field data collection.

Results

Background characteristics

Six of the eight RECs were university or research-based institutions. The majority of the RECs (87.5%) had been operational for more than five years with half of them indicating that the strategic focus of their institutions led to their establishment. The RECs were composed of members with varied backgrounds but conspicuously underrepresented were philosophy or ethics specialists and representatives of local Civil Society Organizations. Half of the surveyed RECs had a dedicated annual budget for their operations that ranged between US\$3,490.00 to US\$8,724.00 for the 2020 fiscal year. All the RECs reported having approved Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) with the majority (75%) being operational for the last five years.

Training activities of RECs in Ghana

Six (75.0%) of the RECs surveyed indicated that they have organised training activities for their members and their clients. Significantly, most of these activities targeted the committee members instead of research investigators. Key informant asserted that:

when new members are appointed to join our committee, we take them through training or an orientation on the mandate of the REC and its core activities.... Ideally, every year, they should have some training including international conferences but we are constrained by funding to carry out these activities as envisaged. We also organise orientation sessions for some faculty members and students especially when we observe that the protocols that we were receiving from them are below standard...

Main achievements, challenges, and way forward

Table 1: Main achievements, challenges and way forward

Responses	Yes [F (%)]	No [F (%)]	Total [F (%)]
Main achievements of RECs			
Review and approval of research protocols	3 (37.5)	5 (62.5)	8 (100.0)
Training and staff development	2 (25.0)	6 (75.0)	8 (100.0)
Enhanced protection of research participants	1 (12.5)	7 (87.5)	8 (100.0)
Main challenges			
Inadequate funding/board members & no national REC	1 (12.5)	7 (87.5)	8 (100.0)
Limited logistics, inadequate funding & no national REC	1 (12.5)	7 (87.5)	8 (100.0)
Problems with absence of national REC			
No coordinated regulation of RECs, no supervision & no accreditation of RECs	1 (12.5)	7 (87.5)	8 (100.0)
Recommendations			
Establishment of national REC	6 (75.0)	2 (25.0)	8 (100.0)
Composition of multidisciplinary review REC members	1 (12.5)	7 (87.5)	8 (100.0)
Electronic protocol submission processes	1 (12.5)	7 (87.5)	8 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2021

Limitations

Our main limitation is the challenge usually associated with self-accounts/self-administered surveys. The 50% response rate as well as the diversity of the RECs surveyed also makes it impossible for us to generalize the findings to cover the activities of all RECs in Ghana.

References

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