The CIOMS guidelines for epidemiological research: lights and shadows

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International Ethical Guidelines for Epidemiological Studies

prepared by the
Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS)

in collaboration with the
World Health Organization
International Ethical Guidelines for Epidemiological Studies

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(printed version forthcoming)
CONTENTS 1

Acknowledgements
Background
Introduction
International Instruments and Guidelines
General Ethical Principles
CONTENTS 2

1. Ethical justification and scientific validity of epidemiological research involving human subjects
2. Ethical review committees
3. Ethical review of externally sponsored research
4. Individual informed consent
5. Obtaining informed consent: essential information for prospective research subjects
6. Obtaining informed consent: obligations of investigators and sponsors
CONTENTS 3

7. Compensation for participation
8. Benefits, harms and risks of study participation
9. Special limitations on risk when research involves individuals who are not capable of giving informed consent
10. Research in populations and communities with limited resources
11. Choice of controls in clinical trials
12. Equitable distribution of burdens and benefits in the selection of subjects in research
13. Research involving vulnerable persons
14. Research involving children
15. Research involving individuals who by reason of mental or behavioural disorders are not capable of giving adequately informed consent
16. Women as research participants
17. Pregnant women as research participants
18. Safeguarding confidentiality
CONTENTS 5

19. Right of injured subjects to treatment and compensation
20. Strenghtening capacity for ethical and scientific review and biomedical research
21. Ethical obligation of external sponsors to provide health-care services
22. Disclosure and review of potential conflicts of interest
23. Use of the Internet in epidemiological studies
24. Use of stored biological samples and related data
CONTENTS 6

Appendix 1: Glossary
Appendix 2: Items to be included in a protocol (or associated document) for epidemiological research involving human subjects
Appendix 3: The Declaration of Helsinki
Appendix 4: Members of the Core Group
Appendix 5: Commenters on the draft guidelines
Structure of the guidelines

1. Self-contained set (→ booklet)
2. Rationale and process of production explained
3. Ethical principles outlined
4. Twenty-four guidelines, each of one to four paragraphs
5. Each guideline is followed by a commentary expanding on the rationale, particularly as the guideline applies to observational studies, special circumstances of application etc.
for biomedical research:

CIOMS
International Ethical Guidelines
for Biomedical Research
involving Human Subjects

(2002 version, printed version available)
Ethical principles are (assumed to be) ‘universal’- Ethical guidelines for BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH and EPDEMIОLOGICAL RESEARCH should be

- Different for the two types of research
- The same for both types of research, with appropriate variations as needed
- Parallel but specific for each of the two types
Researchers have an obligation to those who contributed personal information and donated biological specimens for research purposes to make actual optimal research use of these data and specimens for the benefit of people’s health.
Lights and Shadows

- Only international (at world level) guidelines
  Adaptability to all contexts?
- They identify ethical issues in observational studies
  These issues may not raise any real problem
- Provide guide on how to plan and conduct an ethically proper study
  Several recommendations create an unnecessary extra-work to researchers or may even make a study unfeasible
- Provide guide for proper use of biological samples
  They restrain the use of precious biological samples
- If followed they prevent unethical and scientifically invalid studies
  They leave too much room for discretionary procedures generating unethical and scientifically invalid studies
Identifying ethical issues
An ethical problem emerges when:

an action entails a conflict between two "good"

therefore........
The four “prima facie” principles for ethical analysis

1a. Nonmaleficence: do not do harm
1b. Beneficence: do good
2. Autonomy: respect people freedom
3. Justice: treat everyone equally
1. Analyze a research protocol to identify the ethical problems.

2. For this purpose apply *each* of the four ethical principles from the viewpoints of *each* involved party [researcher(s), sponsor, scientific community, society, subjects in the research]

3. Regard for a moment as the primary viewpoint the one of the subjects included in the research.
Informed consent
When informed consent is required?

[ informed consent process is not the same as an informed consent form! ]
“Informed consent” means:

- **information** to enable *free* consent
- **consent form**
- **consent process**
When is informed consent required?

- It is always required!
- Exceptions may be considered (and approved by ethics committees) for use of personal data in archives (eg registers), particularly when consent would be hard or impossible to obtain.
Is this acceptable?

- “Someone comes into your house. You are not there. You do not know who he is. He does not know you. He does not touch anything but looks at everything in your house and leaves. You never knew he was there.”

(Capron AM, 1991)
Guideline 4
Individual informed consent

For all epidemiological research involving humans the investigator must obtain the voluntary informed consent of the prospective subject or, in the case of an individual who is not capable of giving informed consent, the permission of a legally authorized representative in accordance with applicable law. Waiver of individual informed consent is to be regarded as exceptional, and must in all cases be approved by an ethical review committee unless otherwise permitted under national legislation that conforms to the ethical principles in these Guidelines.
Biological samples
Ownership or right of access and use?

• “At any moment the genes are part of the bodies of particular people who in free society retain rights that are governed by the rules of informed consent “

(Eckardt RB, 1996)
Records versus stored biological specimens (personally identifiable)

- Records carrying collected information can generate new information in large but finite amount through record linkage.
- Collected biological specimens can generate in principle an indefinite amount of new information through old and novel analytical determinations.
Guideline 24
Use of stored biological samples and related data(1)

When collecting and storing human biological samples (and related data, such as health or employment records) for future epidemiological research, the investigator must obtain the voluntary informed consent of the individual donor or, in the case of an individual who is not capable of giving informed consent, the permission of a legally authorized representative in accordance with applicable law.
Guideline 24
Use of stored biological samples and related data (2)

The consent should specify: the conditions and duration of storage; who will have access to the samples; the foreseeable uses of the samples, whether limited to an already fully defined study or extending to a number of wholly or partially undefined studies; and the intended goal of such use, whether only for research, basic or applied, or also for commercial purposes. The ethical review committee should satisfy itself that the proposed collection and storage protocol and the consent procedure meet these specifications.
Guideline 24
Use of stored biological samples and related data(3)

The protocol of every study using stored human biological samples (and related data) must be submitted to an ethical review committee, which should satisfy itself that the proposed use of the samples comes within the scope specifically agreed to by the subjects. For stored samples collected for past research, clinical or other purposes without informed consent to their use for research, the ethical review committee may consider waiving the consent if it proves materially unfeasible to obtain it, provided that it concludes that doing so would not harm the rights or welfare of the persons from whom the samples were collected.
Three sources of stored samples are commonly in use:

a. repositories of samples collected and stored with informed consent for long-term, epidemiological studies (for example, so-called "population biobanks");

b. repositories of samples collected and stored in the context of a specific research without explicit and fully-informed consent (in line with practices prevailing at the time);

c. repositories of samples (typically surgically excised tissues, bioptic fragments, and leftover blood collected for diagnostic purposes) collected and stored in the context of routine clinical care or pathological or forensic examination.
The source of a record or biological samples may be *personally identifiable* because:

a. It carries the person’s name or a unique identifier such as social security number (*nominal record or sample*)

b. It is linked to a source of personal identification (eg medical record or abstract of it, civil register etc.) by a simple or double code (*linked, coded [double-coded] record or sample*)

In all those cases, fully informed consent is required from the person from whom the sample has been obtained.
b. Repositories of samples collected and stored in the past with no informed consent in the context of research.

When already existing repositories of biological samples collected and stored without an explicit consent procedure offer important and otherwise unobtainable data, an ethical review committee needs to decide whether the use of such samples is justified in the absence of explicit consent. Arguments pertaining to this decision are discussed within the more general framework of waiving of consent in the Commentary on Guideline 4, under the section "Waiver of consent requirements".
Lights and Shadows

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Porto Alegre cathedral
Supplementary slides
Ethics = moral philosophy = discourse on moral rules of personal behaviour

*it is developed to some extent by everyone,*

*it is amplified more systematically by philosophers,*

*and it takes an “institutional” form within institutions such as formal religions, committees etc.*
Three different but interrelated bodies of norms:

- **Ethics**: for individuals
- **Law**: for individuals as subjects in society
- **Deontology**: special law for individuals in a profession
Ethical and legal rules are not necessarily the same!

- **Law**
  - Legal
  - Illegal
- **Moral**
  - To treat a patient
  - "Active" euthanasia
- **Ethics**
  - Immoral
  - Overtreatment
  - Homicide
Ethical and legal rules are not necessarily the same!

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<th>Law</th>
<th>Legal</th>
<th>Illegal</th>
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<td>Moral</td>
<td>To interview people</td>
<td>To get people’s cause of death</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immoral</td>
<td>To pay people in study</td>
<td>To take away clinical records</td>
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Key general references

International reference documents:

- Helsinki Declaration (2000 revision)
- CIOMS International ethical guidelines for biomedical research involving human subjects (2002 revision)
- CIOMS International guidelines for ethical review of epidemiological studies (1991; currently under revision)
Ethical analysis : principle

Carry an ethical analysis of the research protocol in order to identify the ethical problems
### Ethical analysis: a scheme

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<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Justice</th>
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