

# Ethical issues in conducting health research in conflict setting?

- Ethical dilemmas of Dr.P
- Treating injuries vs conducting research
- Children as subjects
- Research feasibility
- Interacting with authorities
- Ethical challenges faced by field staff
- What can be done?
- Conclusion

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A screenshot of a web browser displaying an article from the AMA Journal of Ethics. The browser's address bar shows the URL: journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/should-children-be-enrolled-clinical-research-conflict-zones/2022-06. The article title is "Should Children Be Enrolled in Clinical Research in Conflict Zones?" by Dónal O'Mathúna, PhD and Nawaraj Upadhaya, PhD. The article is categorized as "CASE AND COMMENTARY" and "JUN 2022". It is also marked as "Peer-Reviewed". The browser's taskbar at the bottom shows the date and time as 12:02 PM on 10/15/2022, along with various system icons and a search bar.

# Ethical dilemmas of Dr. P and his team



- Dr. P is a physician and researcher from an East African country.
- Dr. P works for an International NGO and provides health services from the regional hospital located in conflict zone.
- Dr. P and colleagues consider researching the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and mental health among children in the region and whether and to what extent current policies address their needs.



# Ethical dilemmas of Dr. P and his team



- Whether a child's assent to participate in research or an adult relative's consent to enroll a child in research would be ethically sufficient?
- There are chances of blood sample being lost due to security incidents, roadblocks, and ambushes.
- Test results are available only after 14 days. Due to ongoing conflict there are challenges to take the test result to the children's house.



# Ethical dilemmas of Dr. P and his team



- If the children's parents have been killed and no guardian is present, it's unclear whether keeping newly orphaned children in a research protocol is ethically appropriate.
- it is ethically problematic to wait until conflict ends to conduct research that could lead to improvements.



# Treating injuries vs. conducting research



- Ethical dilemmas often are portrayed as one option vs another, especially when both options are ethical but prioritize different ethical principles.
- Instead of viewing this case as an “either-or” dilemma in which the clinicians should *either* care for patients *or* do research, a “both-and” approach would allow the clinicians to strive *both* to care for patients *and* to do research.
- Simply “export” health interventions shown to be effective in “stable”—typically high-income—countries to conflict settings without evaluating their effectiveness is also problematic.

# Children as subjects

- Children's participation in research requires additional ethical scrutiny, especially in humanitarian and conflict settings.
- The case of Dr P is further complicated by the fact that children often are separated from their parents during conflicts.
- Excluding them from research until they are old enough to consent might deny them the benefits that such research might generate.
- Allowing relatives to give consent for children's participation in research—might be reasonable, especially if accepted in the region.



# Research feasibility



- Humanitarian organizations and individuals working in conflict zones might be overstretched and under-resourced.
- The case of Dr P described challenges of transporting samples, poor infrastructure, and security issues.
- Before conducting clinical research in conflict zones, assess the opportunities and the challenges (including methodological, logistical, political, and ethical challenges).
- Conducting unfeasible research has ethical implications, since starting an unfeasible study would waste resources.



# Interacting with authorities



- Humanitarian organizations working in conflict settings find themselves walking a tightrope between various authorities.
- Getting the balance wrong can have fatal consequences for those working for humanitarian organizations and those they seek to help.
- The collection of information or biological samples might be viewed with suspicion
- In the case of Dr P, the hospital could be attacked if it is viewed as collaborating with one side or the other in the conflict.





# Ethical challenges faced by research staff



- The role conflicts (maintaining the objectivity of researchers while responding to participant's request for support)
- Feeling of guilt and moral distress (seeing acute situation but not being able to address)
- *“And sometimes while doing it [research] in the humanitarian crisis, person's need could be different. People are in crisis but without giving them anything and asking them question might make them feel humiliated and stigmatised which would result in even more stress in that person.” (NEP 16).*
- High target for interviews in insecure working conditions (pressure of finishing quickly but also maintaining methodological rigor)

# What can be done (1)?



## Protection of research staff from physical and emotional harm

- By making amendments to current ethical standards
- By improving the working conditions
- By addressing the power imbalances between researchers from high income countries and researchers from low and middle income countries
- *“There is a need for proper understanding (proper trainings) about ethics in all levels. There is a need that researchers are well recognized by having international standards for ethical considerations and approval” (AF17).*

# What can be done (2)?



## Dissemination of preliminary findings with research participants

- *“Yes this [no provision of validation of findings with research participants] is also one ethical issue. What is the benefit for them?. Data is taken from them and analyzed. They should know about it too because it is their right. If like 10-20 people participated in research then they have that right to know what they said and how their information was used” (NEP 15).*

# What can be done (3)?



## Institutional development, capacity building and adequate financing of national Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)

- *“Well, I propose that there should be just a department for research with assigned and dedicated people and well trained. There should be capacity building and training of the staff that are reviewing proposals for ethics approval, so there is improvement in their work” (SS59).*
- *“Likewise, ethics is not only limited to giving approvals. Follow-up is necessary after that also. They have to follow whether the research is being carried out in a same way it was submitted. These types of follow ups are not done” (NEP30).*

# What can be done (4)



**Deep ethical reflections through greater dialogue and discussion among stakeholders**

- *“It will be good if there is close follow up in the field by the ethics committee, to see the progress of our research and see if there are any challenges. It could be done in different ways, such as a phone call” (ET27).*

# Conclusion



- The ethical and practical challenges of conducting research in conflict settings should not lead to it being abandoned.
- Creative approaches should be explored to manage time, find resources, and adapt protocols as needed.
- Conducting research ethically in conflict settings requires significant effort and flexibility, as well as sufficient resources and expertise.
- Research with children is an important way to address their needs (understood holistically) with evidence-based interventions and policies.
- Viewing children as too vulnerable to participate in research might further marginalize them and leave their treatment without supportive evidence.

# Thank You !



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