

THE GLOBAL FORUM ON RESEARCH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY

A Replicable Model of Open, Global Collaboration Among Researchers, Scientists, Ethicists, and Academics as Individuals and Global Citizens

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As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in early 2020, a global group of ethicists, public health professionals, scientists, and socially engaged persons came together under the operational title of ‘Preparedness Planning for Clinical Research During Public Health Emergencies’ (PREP).

The purpose was to share knowledge, experiences, and questions to learn, improve performance locally, and teach one another, with greater understanding of and sensitivity to the rapidly changing and dynamic conditions. We believe it was the largest and most inclusive grassroots gathering of its kind during this period.

Facilitated by the Good Clinical Practice Alliance – Europe (GCPA), the Strategic Initiative for Developing Capacity in Ethical Review (SIDCER), and the Multi-Regional Clinical Trials Center, Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Harvard, the group met weekly for a year on an open, virtual platform, eventually involving over 120 individuals from more than 50 countries.

This group received reports from, and engaged discussions and debate with, a broad range of individual experts as well as global and national organizations. We examined a range of topics from clinical trials on vaccines and therapeutics, to pediatrics research and care, to databases and data sharing, to research in the social sciences and anthropology, to current developments in ethics review and informed consent, to larger political, economic, social, and ethics structures in the pandemic context.

Several research projects were carried out by the group, including into the attitudes of healthcare workers, a global survey of ethics review practices and interests, and the drafting of global guidance to support ethics committees during this challenging time.

In May 2021, after more than a year of meeting and building friendships across global divides, the GE2P2 Global Foundation, a member of the PREP group, assumed leadership functions. The group has continued monthly Zoom calls and email exchange to explore the issues and themes inventoried above and invigorated by collaboration.

Adopting the title ‘Global Forum on Research Ethics and Integrity (GFREI)’ early in 2022, the participants see it as a continuing, virtual, open, global, collaborative forum of individuals interested in advancing research ethics and research integrity. Participants engage as individuals – as colleagues and as global citizens – whatever the titles, credentials, institutional affiliations, or countries of those who share in the discussion. The participants speak for themselves, comfortable to share their knowledge, understanding and experience, their backgrounds and frameworks, and any real or potential influences on their positions.

Now in the third year of convening, GFREI members are working to strengthen research ethics and

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associated human rights, secure integrity in science, and advance global public health through free, virtual assembly across global boundaries.

We assess that this model —open membership, respectful discussion, and collaborative work —is replicable and able to be applied to other areas of focus. Those who might wish to know more or participate should contact the corresponding author.