



IANPHI Thematic Committee on Pandemic Preparedness, Response and Recovery -
Webinar 'Ethical integration of research in public health emergencies'
June 24, 2025

Summary

The first speaker was Henrique Lopes, from the University NOVA of Lisbon.

His presentation focused on the importance of preparing for ethical issues in emergencies, an aspect often overlooked in favor of operational and tactical preparations. He highlighted that very few institutions in Europe conduct tactical drills on ethics.

Henrique Lopes identified six main types of emergencies: pandemics and epidemics, natural disasters, forced displacement, wars, localized outbreaks, and environmental crises. These contexts require ethical preparation before they arise because prompt reactions are needed, leaving little time for deliberation. Ethical guidelines should be established in advance to address various complexities, such as priority access to resources, and prioritizing research for different population groups.

He emphasized the diversity of ethical interpretations among healthcare professions, each with its own codes and definitions. This diversity necessitates finding compromises to safeguard ethical standards during emergencies. Key ethical challenges include body manipulation across different cultures, ensuring hygiene and privacy, and addressing the resistance of specific social groups to certain clinical procedures.

Training and drills are essential to identify ethical breaking points and prepare professionals for the ethical dilemmas they may face. Different emergencies require different ethical considerations, and coordination among professional groups is vital to prevent people from being lost in the system.

Henrique Lopes also addressed the ethical implications of technology, particularly during emergencies. Ensuring that technology supports rather than exacerbates problems is crucial. He uses the example of the blackout in the Iberian Peninsula last April (April 28, 2025) to illustrate how technological failures can lead to chaos and near-collapse of critical services.

Internationally, equitable access to resources must be ensured, and plans must be in place to fight disinformation and maintain democratic values during emergencies. Henrique Lopes warned against the acceptance of authoritarianism during crises and emphasized that emergencies should not justify the dehumanization of health services.

The second speaker was Mohamud Sheek Hussein from the United Arab Emirates University.

He discussed the challenges, principles, and recommendations related to research in developing countries, with a focus on Africa. Developing countries bear a significant burden of infectious diseases and are often the origins of pandemic outbreaks. Effective research in these regions requires a multidisciplinary approach involving clinicians, public health officials, epidemiologists, statisticians, and veterinary doctors, especially since many outbreaks are zoonotic diseases.

One critical issue is obtaining informed consent from patients during outbreaks, as they may be too sick or confused to understand the research process. Balancing urgency with ethical considerations is essential. Despite the high incidence of outbreaks in Africa, there is limited research capability and funding, leading to underrepresentation in global scientific publications. Factors such as lack of funding, weak healthcare infrastructure, and cultural sensitivities contribute to this disparity.

Ethical challenges in developing countries include weak research ethics committees, inadequate informed consent processes, and lack of transparency. Mohamud Sheek Hussein highlighted the case of mpox (monkeypox), which broke out in the Democratic Republic of Congo and spread to other African countries due to poor control measures and lack of collaboration and border control.

He suggested several recommendations to improve research in developing countries:

- Strengthening research ethics committees and ensuring they have clear guidelines.
- Ensuring informed consent and respecting cultural sensitivities.
- Protecting vulnerable populations and training researchers and doctors in research methodologies.
- Investing in research to improve accessibility to publications and contextualizing global guidelines to local realities.

He concluded on a positive note, mentioning progress in Africa post-COVID-19, such as the development of surveillance systems and plans for vaccination factories to achieve self-sustainability and improve research standards.

The webinar ended with a fruitful discussion between the two panelists and the moderators, fueled by questions from the audience.