CBEC goes to Kenya: CK-BTI Bioethics Training Initiative

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This year CBEC entered into formal collaboration with the Kenyan Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) in Nairobi to establish a comprehensive, multipronged bioethics education program in Kenya over the next 5 years. The CBEC-KEMRI Bioethics Training Initiative (CK-BTI) is funded by the International Research Ethics Education and Curriculum Development Award of the Fogarty International Centre of the National Institutes of Health, USA.

What made CBEC think of Africa? Over the past 5 years, CBEC has accepted 15 students from Kenya into its academic programs. After Karachi, Nairobi now has the second largest concentration of CBEC alumni and students. Through CK-BTI, we believe that CBEC is in a position to help KEMRI develop its own bioethics programs. Over the next 3 years, an international Advisory Board consisting of individuals with a strong background in bioethics education will help guide the Curriculum Adaptation Committee and the two Program Directors, Elizabeth Bukusi and myself, to adapt the CBEC curriculum to East African needs.

By 2021, KEMRI will induct its first Postgraduate Diploma (PGD) class followed by a Master in Bioethics (MBE) class. In the intervening years, the CK-BTI program will offer Certificate Courses (CC) in Research and Public Health Ethics, Research Methodology and Clinical Ethics at different times through the year. These CCs will evolve into the modules for PGD and MBE programs.

In addition, a Practicum that provides students with hands on experience of running an Institutional Review Board secretariat has been coupled with the Research Ethics Certificate Course. Five students from Pakistan will be provided full funding each year to participate along with Kenyans in the Practicum at KEMRI’s Scientific and Ethical Review Unit (SERU). With 4 IRBs which handle about 6000 proposals yearly, SERU employs 18 people and provides an excellent practical training opportunity.

CKI-BTI activities began in Nairobi, with the Practicum followed by two certificate courses from November 20 to December 9, 2017. Five participants from public and private sector institutions of Pakistan took part in the courses. Most Kenyan participants were researchers, research regulators and IRB members, with very few clinicians. However, as the program expands, we hope to attract physicians and other health professionals. Some of the participants had previously attended research ethics related courses but with a focus on compliance and regulatory issues. Participation in the CK-BTI courses exposed them to the moral ethos behind research regulations. The courses stimulated discussion on the ethical values underlying processes, such as respect for the individual, as the basis for obtaining informed consent.

We believe that CK-BTI will provide deeper insight into the ethics discourse taking place in Africa. The challenges of developing a contextual and relevant bioethics program for Kenya and East Africa are tremendous, but so are the potential rewards.

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