“It is a month now, a month later than I had expected to hear back from the ethics review committee. I wonder what is taking them so long. It cannot be so difficult to review and to send comments back.” After waiting somewhat impatiently for two long months, I decided to make a phone call, whereupon a secretary told me, “Just wait, please just wait. Be patient.”

As a young, mid-level scientist, I was frustrated by systems that did not seem to work efficiently. Every time I asked a question, I was told that I did not know anything about ‘ethics’ and ‘research regulation’ and I should wait and be patient. But as a researcher it was clear to me that we were losing opportunities for doing valuable research which could potentially change the lives of people for the better. And so, I set out to try and find out, “What is this mysterious “ethics” that I do not understand?”

My first foray into Research Ethics was through an application to the University of Cape Town in a program funded by the Fogarty Center IRENSA, run by a well-known name in the Bioethics field, Dr. Solomon Benatar. Since I was enrolled as a PhD student at the University of Washington, Seattle at that time, the program’s modular structure with three contact sessions during the year appealed to me. However, when I sought institutional support, I was refused with the concern that I would be unable to devote time to two simultaneous programs. After completing my PhD, it took me six attempts before I was finally able to get into the program. On the last attempt, I think my sheer doggedness melted the administrator’s heart and fortunately, I became part of the final class that was trained by Professor Benatar before his retirement from the program.

And so I started learning about bioethics. The first shock was hearing about philosophy in the first module. I wondered where I was in high school when people did the history of the Greeks because it really did seem like Greek to me. But I did graduate with my Postgraduate Diploma in Research Ethics at the end of that year. Armed with this, I felt that I now had some qualifications that allowed me to speak about bioethics, and indeed, this allowed me to come to the table and raise my concerns. As part of my Postgraduate Diploma project, I started thinking about the challenges of the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) ethics review system and looking for opportunities to improve it.

The second step in my bioethics journey was seeking funding to support a change in the KEMRI ethics review processes. Through the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP), we were fortunate to get funded for an ethics capacity building grant which enabled us to do a thorough review of our system and overhaul the process. Coupled with this, the EDCTP grant provided funding for training so I began to explore further educational opportunities in bioethics. The one local bioethics training program required me to be away for nine months but as I was then serving as the Deputy Director (Research and Development), I could not be away from KEMRI for almost a year.

I started looking online for Continued on page 2

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regional and local programs that might be modular but offered a Master’s degree. That is when I found CBEC’s call for applications for the Master in Bioethics (MBE) program, and after reading about the training they offered, I was intrigued. I was accepted into the modular program which required me to travel four times to Karachi. Uniquely, CBEC's programs were completely free and they also provided free accommodation for out of town students while the EDCTP funding paid for my travel costs to and from Karachi. The challenge was getting into an intensive program with limited seats.

Fast forward to 2014: I graduated from CBEC’s MBE program. It was clear to me that my training at CBEC and my previous training at Cape Town had changed my worldview. My understanding of ethics was no longer about black and white, or about dos and don’ts. It was about looking contextually at issues, weighing the risks versus the benefits and making decisions that would help researchers but would also protect their research subjects. While in Mexico at the biennial meeting of the Association of Bioethics, I floated the idea to Dr. Aamir Jafarey, one of my mentors at CBEC: Would CBEC consider partnering with KEMRI to plan and possibly implement a training program in bioethics? It seemed to me that a modular program like the one at CBEC would attract mid to senior level people who would become the bioethics resource needed within Kenya.

Kenya at this point had over 60 universities and over 22 accredited Ethics Review Committees, but there were insufficient training programs. The third step in my journey began when CBEC and KEMRI submitted a proposal to the Fogarty International Centre (NIH, USA) for funding the CBEC KEMRI Bioethics Training Initiative (CK-BTI), a joint academic initiative for developing bioethics capacity in the two countries. In 2017, we received funding for running the CK-BTI program for the next five years.

Why work with Pakistan? Why work with CBEC? The experience of the CBEC modules had been highly interactive and hands-on, with an international, multidisciplinary faculty. It did not just teach us the principles of bioethics or research ethics. It taught us to think broadly. It opened our minds. It changed our worldviews. I wanted the same experience for students and colleagues in Kenya by providing them with opportunities to examine their worldviews, to think critically and to question. We recently held our first two CK-BTI certificate courses in Nairobi and indeed, our first 45 participants told us, “We came thinking we know. Now what we do know is that there is so much that we do not know.”

With CK-BTI, I believe that we can change the landscape of both research and clinical ethics within Kenya and also make a difference to Pakistan. My MBE thesis was on the teaching of clinical ethics in the two oldest medical schools in Kenya. During my research, it became clear that even though clinical ethics is listed as a subject, the way it is taught, the emphasis it is given and the lack of examination leaves young doctors woefully unprepared to face moral dilemmas in their clinical practice. I believe that CK-BTI has the potential to change how we as Kenyans think about clinical ethics, and enable clinicians to ask, “How can we do this differently?”

What is the possibility of this program going into the future? The next five years should be an exciting ride. My hope is that in the future, young researchers will not just be told “wait, somebody will get back to you,” but will get feedback that helps them reflect on ethical issues and be allowed to ask questions. It has been a privilege to grow and learn in the field of bioethics. If there is one thing that I have learned it is that nothing is constant except change, and if there is one thing that is clear, it is that my journey in bioethics has only just begun!