An IRB Mentorship Programme as a Means of Increasing Ethics Review Capacity in Institutions
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Overview: The National Human Research Protection System started in 2000 with the setting up of a National Ethics Committee (NEC). As the system matured over the years, it has become a centralised review process where final approval is granted only by the NEC. As capacity has been built within the NEC over the years, a few tertiary institutions have also tried to build the same capacity to carry out their own reviews, but have been slowed down by lack of funds and also lack of continued in-house training. This, coupled with the drive by the NEC to decentralise the Ethics Review system to improve efficiency, has led to the development of an IRB Mentorship Programme. The NEC has nine highly qualified regulatory and ethics officers that run the NEC, review research, carry out site monitoring of all approved research and conduct GCP, and Ethics training for IRB members and research teams.

Additional Information: The Mentorship Programme involves: a. Basic theoretical training in research ethics and good clinical practice for all faculty members and institutional stakeholders (two days); b. Advanced Ethics Course for all potential IRB members (five days); c. IRB Formation and Secretariat set up (institution's responsibility); d. Two week internship for IRB administrators (TOR, SOP development, IRB101, Monitoring fieldwork); e. IRB members mentored by the NEC through meeting attendance of NEC sessions (each IRB member must attend at least two NEC meetings per year); f. Five Day Reviewers Training (all IRB members and reviewers); g. Registration with the NEC; and h. Continuous assessment carried out by NEC on a six month basis. The greatest lesson is that mentoring IRB members is a long continuous process and it takes time for them to appreciate the work and time commitment required of them. Most budding IRBs fail to move from step B because of failure to commit to being an IRB member. Out of the 12 targeted institutions, only one has completed all steps and most are stuck at step B or C.

Future Programme Usage: We envisage that the programme will be adopted by the institutions that have completed the mentorship process and they, in turn, will mentor other smaller institutions. The IRB that completed the programme has already found an institution that has started mentoring as well under the supervision of the NEC. The Mentorship Programme is unique in that it has the practical aspects of IRB meetings and field work that allows the IRB members to get hands on experience.