

## THE ETHICS OF RESEARCH

(Adapted from Proposed Ethical Guidelines, SPMA)

### Ethics: principles

Ethical principles should be based on the following:

- Autonomy: that is the respect for the individual and the respect for human dignity
- Beneficence: that is the benefit to the individual participating in the research
- Non-maleficence: that is the absence of harm to the research participant
- Justice: that is the equal distribution of risks and benefits between individuals and communities

### Research

Research is the systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation designed to develop or contribute to generalisable knowledge. Such investigation raises ethical issues.

### Basic ethics codes of behaviour

The following should apply to any research programme:

- *Participant as person*  
Respect for the autonomy of the participant. The participant must be treated as a unique human being within the context of his or her community system. The freedom of choice must be safeguarded.
- *Human rights*  
Respect for basic human rights as entrenched in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996)*, must be acknowledged.
- *Justice, Fairness and Objectivity*  
The dignity of people involved in research should be honoured and should not be exposed to intentions and motives not directly attached to the research project, its methodology and objectives.
- *Competence*  
Researchers must be professionally and personally qualified and must be accountable for their research. Professional standards should be maintained in accordance with academic training.
- *Integrity*  
Researchers must be honest and fair, be honest about their own limitations, competence, belief systems, values and needs.
- *Sensitivity*  
Scientific research must be balanced with the values and dignity of the subjects of the research being held in high regard.
- *Confidentiality*  
Confidentiality must be respected under all circumstances. Documentation should be safeguarded and considered as private within the limits set by the research project.
- *Demarcation of roles*  
A mutual understanding of the roles and interests of the researchers and the participants should be established.
- *Communication*  
Clear and understandable verbal communication is required with the factual data and cultural values should be considered.
- *Indirect coercion*  
Direct or indirect coercion in the name of research should be avoided under all circumstances. Coercion may include the exploitation of vulnerable people. Taking undue advantage of a participant should be prevented. The misuse of authority and influence must not be allowed.

### Legal and procedural requirements

- *Consent*  
Subject to the constitutional provisions contained in the Bill of Rights, a person may not be subjected to medical or scientific research without their informed consent. This implies that research must honour the constitutional provisions.
- *Form of consent*  
Written information and consent forms should be the norm although exceptions could be allowed under justifiable circumstances.
- *Capacity to consent*  
Consent should be given by a person legally and factually competent to give consent. Authorised consent may be required in the case of mental or physical disability, or in the case of children or the elderly.
- *Informed consent*  
Research participants can only be required to provide informed consent if they know and appreciate what they are consenting to. Therefore, adequate information must be provided. Researchers must disclose any potential risks or benefits to potential participants.
- *Free and voluntary consent*  
Consent may not be induced by fear, force, coercion, compulsion, deceit, fraud, undue influence, perverse incentives or financial gain.
- *Revocable consent*  
Consent may be withdrawn without prejudice, in any form, and at any time prior to and during the proposed research process.

### Assessment of the ethics of research

- *Independent ethical review*  
All research must be subject to independent ethical review and should be conducted by the Research Ethics Committee.
- *Knowledge of involvement*  
Participants in research must be made fully aware of their position and the nature of the research (see Constitutional provisions).
- *Role and competence of researcher*  
The researcher must be properly qualified and experienced and command the necessary facilities to undertake the proposed research and to ensure the safety of the participants.
- *Research Ethics Committee*  
The Research Ethics Committee has a crucial role to play in ensuring that the research is properly regulated in terms of research ethics. The Committee should act as judge of whether the research conforms to generally accepted and acknowledged ethical codes.