

Research Brief

An Interprofessional Approach to Assessing Research Ethics Capacity in Vietnam: Implications for Nursing Education

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Abstract

This study assessed the knowledge, practices, attitudes, and educational needs related to research ethics across health professions faculty, including nursing, in a university located in Vietnam. Consistent themes across five focus groups and two interviews included promoting knowledge of research ethics, ethics in context, and the value of international partnerships to promote ongoing knowledge of research ethics. Results from this study can be used to strengthen the university's curriculum reform efforts for nursing programs and other health profession curricula across the university. Research partnership opportunities may further the development of research ethics among nursing faculty and students.

KEY WORDS Nursing Education – Nursing Research – Research Ethics – Vietnam

Historically, global research has been conducted in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) by researchers from high-income countries (HIC), leading to exploitation and underdevelopment of research capacity in LMIC (Baumann, 2014). However, research is rapidly evolving in LMIC with efforts supported by organizations including Sigma Theta Tau International's Global Advisory Panel on the Future of Nursing and Midwifery (2018) and the National League for Nursing (2017).

Negotiating the relationships among culture, research, and ethics is exceptionally challenging for researchers from LMIC and HIC. Issues of recruiting research participants, informed consent, and the researcher's personal perceptions of research ethics are emerging in the literature on a global scale (Gheondea-Eladi, 2017; Murphy et al., 2015; Nakkash et al., 2017). The Fogarty International Research Ethics Education and Curriculum Development Program provides support for research ethics capacity development across the

globe; but to date, Vietnam has not been included in the efforts (Millum et al., 2013).

Nurses are often excluded from research ethics capacity development efforts; but as nursing organizations call for increased global research collaboration, every opportunity to expand capacity should be explored. Nurses are uniquely positioned to contribute to research and ethical challenges that may emerge (Barlow et al., 2018). The purpose of this study was to assess the knowledge, practices, attitudes, and educational needs related to research ethics across the faculty in a university located in central Vietnam.

BACKGROUND

As an emerging middle-income country, Vietnam has experienced rapid research growth with ethics review committees in early development at many of its academic institutions. Outcomes from a 2015 assessment included growth in the number of clinical trials, from 25 in 2010 to 72 trials in 2015; however, only 11 Vietnamese nationals were designated principal investigators. In addition, there was some improvement noted in human subjects protection and community involvement during the 2010–2015 time frame (Kagan et al., 2016). Within this time frame, the Board of Ethical Assessment in Vietnam released national guidelines requiring all local research to be reviewed by a local institutional review board (IRB; Board of Ethical Assessment, Ministry of Health, 2013).

Following these developments, a major university in central Vietnam established an ethical review board in 2014. This board reviews at least 270 research proposals each year from the faculties of medicine, nursing, odonto-stomatology, pharmacy, public health, and traditional medicine. Few research proposals originate from nursing; however, an increasing number of nurse faculty are seeking doctoral degrees, and master's programs are planned for the near future. Nursing research is also being introduced into the undergraduate

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curriculum. With research growing within the university, ethical review board members voiced concern regarding the current level of research ethics knowledge and the ability to achieve the university's vision of becoming a leading research institute by 2030.

METHOD

This descriptive qualitative study utilized an adaptation of the octagon model developed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (2002) and used to assess LMIC organizational systems' capacity for research ethics (Hyder et al., 2013, 2015, 2017). This systems model was tested in an African context (Botswana, Uganda, and Zambia), but its potential for application in an Asian country remains unexplored.

In this study, the octagon model was used to collect and organize the data obtained from five focus groups and in-depth interviews with two members of the university's ethics review committee. Specifically, the eight domains of the model were used for developing interview questions with a focus on the values of the institution, organization, implementation and relevance of research ethics activities, competence in research ethics, systems for administering research ethics activities, target groups for the activities, and the overall working environment (Hyder et al., 2017).

Data were collected on site in central Vietnam over a one-week period after IRB approval in both the US and Vietnamese universities. Focus groups were conducted in English using a structured questionnaire based on the octagon model. They took place over 30 to 75 minutes and were digitally recorded with translation into Vietnamese when necessary. HyperTranscribe was used to review the recordings directly after each focus group; HyperResearch software was used for organizing data into descriptive and categorical codes (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Participants were faculty across the university, including faculty deans ($n = 6$), senior faculty researchers ($n = 6$), junior faculty ($n = 11$, including one nurse faculty at the lecturer level), postgraduate students ($n = 12$), and undergraduate students currently involved in research ($n = 10$). Postgraduate students were defined as those students enrolled in either a master's or doctoral program. Nursing was underrepresented in the sample due to the lack of graduate nursing programs and senior nursing faculty. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 54 years, with a median age of 30.5; there was a near equal ratio of women to men (22:23).

Thematic content analysis and ratings derived from the octagon model provided analytic structure. Trustworthiness was established by having research team members actively involved in confirming key concepts pertinent to the setting, establishing a chain of evidence, developing protocols for the focus groups, and reviewing patterns in the data to establish credibility (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

RESULTS

The consistent themes from participants were Promoting Knowledge of Research Ethics, Ethics in Context, and the Value of International Partnerships. Postgraduate students, senior researchers, and deans with extensive international experience discussed their level of research ethics knowledge and the benefits of the experience. These participants expressed understanding of research ethics and "living" ethics in their practice. Currently, all students receive two hours of ethics content, but all desired more information and clarification of the IRB process. Ideas for providing this information to university students and faculty were discussed and debated.

DISCUSSION

Research ethics is at an early stage of development within the university as noted within the first theme, Promoting Knowledge of Research Ethics. This theme is consistent with research findings from other countries where research ethics are being introduced into university courses (Gheondea-Eladi, 2017). The need for promoting knowledge of research ethics as a distinct area of study as well as processes facilitating ethical research was noted. One undergraduate student stated, "[We] do not know if procedures could be harmful to a patient." Although all participants discussed the need for more than the one short workshop currently required, the undergraduates, in particular, were challenged by understanding the role of the ethics review committee and the process required for review. Faculty echoed the need to promote knowledge of research ethics from a human perspective and also noted the lack of ethical guidelines related to animal research: "We need a separate ethics course for humans and animals" and "Research on animals is ignored...they do research with mouse but no guidelines yet."

Administration, faculty, and students differed on ways to promote knowledge of research ethics. Short course formats using a face-to-face approach were discussed by administration and faculty. Some faculty also suggested requiring ethics certification prior to employment, which would promote integration of research ethics into specific courses rather than relying on one workshop. Students wanted to increase their knowledge using an online teaching strategy that could be accessed at any time; others preferred a multiple case study approach with interactive discussion.

The second theme, Ethics in Context, refers to how ethical positioning is manifested as a professional health care provider and the context of the encounter. Faculty stated, "If you do not do research, then you do not care about ethics." They believed that not enough attention is given to ethics and expressed frustration at having to learn about research ethics without guidance, although they also felt they learned new information quickly. The influence of culture was expressed across groups with concerns related to forms translated into Vietnamese and obtaining written consent in a culture more willing to provide verbal consent.

Researchers working within the community were especially concerned with determining research benefits and the community's response toward the research. They stated, "We do not have anything to offer them and I feel the quality of data is not good." Finally, administrators voiced the need for Vietnam-based journals to require ethics approval information. The myriad of issues related to context in central Vietnam mirrors the challenges faced by researchers in other countries who apply ethical guidelines from a Western context without considering local beliefs and values (Nakkash et al., 2017).

Partnerships are highlighted in the third theme, Value of International Partnerships. There is a strong possibility for power imbalances to exist with international research partnerships (Murphy et al., 2015), but this uneven relationship was not expressed by participants. Administration and faculty participants valued international research partnerships and discussed their benefit in relation to implementing research ethics policies from global partners. Participants having extensive research experience and knowledge of research ethics listed partnerships with researchers from Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand. Completing forms for these universities can be complicated, but a team approach was considered helpful.

Conducting the focus groups in English may have hampered participant expression despite the presence of the Vietnamese

co-investigator. Also, results from this study cannot be generalized to universities in other middle-income countries; however, there may be some applicability in other Vietnamese universities due to similar circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Results from this study can be used to strengthen the university's research ethics capacity and vision to become the leading research institution in central Vietnam by 2030. The ongoing development of research ethics training programs may also lead to overall improvement in central Vietnamese health care through research capacity development, as Vietnamese researchers take the lead as principal investigators of clinical research. However, more research is needed to explore the specific challenges in applying research ethics within the context of central Vietnam. A research ethics capacity development program within the university may be strengthened by including online and face-to-face training. Research ethics could also be embedded within existing research courses or those research courses yet to be developed as in the nursing curriculum.

Undergraduate nursing will include a nursing research course, with research ethics now expected to be a priority component. This study provides valuable information in support of these curriculum reform efforts and also suggests an opportunity for short courses taught from an interprofessional perspective with students from all areas of the university engaging in developing research ethics knowledge together.

Cultural issues impacting research ethics require in-depth exploration. This study may facilitate collaboration between nurse educators, researchers, and students in Vietnam and HIC. All members of the research team can further their understanding of other team members' cultural perspective. Nurse educators and researchers from Vietnam and HIC may develop flexible research ethics programs conducive to the specific needs of the country and cultures (Millum et al., 2013). Nursing students involved in research efforts will gain insight into the process of collaboration and appreciate the need to adapt according to cultural context. As nurses across the globe increase their involvement in research, the quality of this research will be affected by knowledge and implementation of research ethics.

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