

Ethics review of research in the context of humanitarian relief work

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Two articles published this week in the open-access journal *PLoS Medicine* highlight the need for, and the practicalities of, getting appropriate ethical review of research done in the context of humanitarian relief.

An article by Doris Schopper and colleagues describes the functioning of the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) independent ethics review board (ERB) and the framework used for ethics review by this board. The board, set up in 2001, currently comprises seven members from around the world, all independent of MSF. In 2008, the last full year of operation, the board reviewed 23 proposals covering a range of topic and study designs. As well as providing an overview the article describes some specific challenging ethical issues encountered by the board since its inception.

In concluding the article, the authors say: "International humanitarian organizations such as MSF will be faced with even more complex health problems in the future as the global environment changes. Research to devise and test new interventions will remain an important part of MSF's agenda, and will most probably increase. As this happens, a major concern will be to ensure that communities in which such research takes place are empowered to become true partners and that vulnerable individuals and groups are effectively protected. The ethical oversight provided by the MSF ERB will be crucial in addressing these challenges."

The editorial, written by the [PLoS Medicine](#) editors, discusses more generally the problems that can arise when research is done in such settings, and notes that ethical oversight of such research needs to be rigorous, but also pragmatic, and suggests what the role of journals should be. As the editorial notes, by supporting initiatives such as the MSF research ethics board, journals can help to address these ethical challenges, at the same time as ensuring that the research they publish adheres to accepted ethical standards.

More information: Schopper D, Upshur R, Matthys F, Singh JA, Bandewar SS, et al. (2009) Research Ethics Review in Humanitarian Contexts: The Experience of the Independent Ethics Review Board of Médecins Sans Frontières. *PLoS Med* 6(7): e1000115.
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