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Commentary

The ESCMID ethics advisory committee (EEAC): purpose and challenges

Elda Righi^{1, *}, Dafna Yahav^{2, 3}, Murat Akova⁴, Asma Nasim⁵, Aleksandra Barac⁶¹ Infectious Diseases, Department of Diagnostics and Public Health, University of Verona, Verona, Italy² Infectious Diseases Unit, Rabin Medical Center, Beilinson Campus, Petah-Tikva, Israel³ Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel⁴ Department of Infectious Diseases, Hacettepe University School of Medicine, Ankara, Turkey⁵ Department of Infectious Diseases, Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation, Karachi, Pakistan⁶ Clinic for Infectious and Tropical Diseases, University Clinical Center of Serbia, Belgrade, Serbia

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As an independent body with advisory purposes, the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESCMID) Ethical Advisory Committee (EEAC) directly reports to the ESCMID Executive Committee (EC) on various ethical matters. The need for a committee that focuses on this topic is mandated by the multiple ethical issues associated with the field of infectious diseases that may affect clinicians and researchers performing individual daily activities, as well as scientific societies and communities dealing with interdisciplinary and cross-institutional activities.

The broad field of infectious diseases ethics (IDE) currently encompasses a series of major global challenges deriving from the potentially unpredictable, explosive, and global impact of emerging and re-emerging diseases [1,2]. The multifaceted interplay between ethics and infectious diseases, however, is not new [2]. Emerging

diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and SARS, started to attract substantial attention to ethical problems posed by infectious diseases in the past decades and following the rise of public health ethics [2]. Compared with other fields, however, IDE is associated with unique aspects, such as infection communicability, limitations of privacy, and liberty to promote the public good, and potentially fatal consequences after person-to-person transmission. These aspects strictly relate to issues of respect for privacy/confidentiality, greater responsibility of treating physicians, prioritization, distributive justice, equality, and combating discrimination.

Most recently, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has unravelled a series of ethical issues at different levels, including patients, physicians, and health care services. The main topics brought to public attention were the restrictions of people's public freedom, health care workers' safety, prioritization of critical care, preparedness of hospitals for infectious diseases outbreaks, and misconceptions about vaccination against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 [3,4].

In addition, at a global level, the current pandemic has reinforced dramatic dilemmas. First, the misdistribution of resources and poor access to care in low- and middle-income countries, combined with less established health and research systems, have impaired the availability of drugs and vaccines [4,5]. Second, balancing the fine line between an individual's autonomy and the needs of society has been challenged by the restrictions posed by the pandemic. Specifically, in 2020 and 2021, the autonomy versus greater good impasse was particularly evident in requests for people's isolation, repeated quarantine periods, and vaccination. Finally, the high speed of recent medical discoveries, leading to over 750 COVID-19–focused publications every month [6] and a fast-track, wide distribution of data, contributed to scientific controversies. The gold rush for publication, coupled with the availability of preprints, has increased the speed of scholarly communication, but it has also raised concerns about scientific quality and ignited disputes on data sharing and intellectual property rights [6–8]. Nevertheless, at all times, and well before COVID-19, infectious diseases physicians have faced other important dilemmas. One

* Corresponding author. Elda Righi, University of Verona, Infectious Diseases, Department of Diagnostics and Public Health, Verona, Veneto, Italy.

E-mail address: elda.righi@libero.it (E. Righi).

example is the use in daily practice of broad-spectrum antibiotics and resultant increasing resistance, a tragedy of the commons [9].

The EEAC has an intrinsic multicultural nature and includes four ESCMID members and an ESCMID membership counsellor (EMeC) coming from five different countries with diverse backgrounds. The current committee took formally office at the beginning of 2021 following an open call issued at the end of 2020. The EEAC meets on a regular basis and interacts directly with the ESCMID EC, addressing both pressing issues and less urgent ethical matters.

With a specific focus on the European infectious diseases and microbiology community and broad attention to global perspectives, the EEAC counsels the EC on regulatory, social, and philosophical issues that derive from ESCMID funded research projects. The EEAC works in close collaboration with the Guidelines Subcommittee in evaluating potential ethical issues associated with the generation and implementation of clinical practice guidelines.

In agreement with the *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* Editorial Office and the ESCMID EC, the EEAC will also serve as an independent body for *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* to be periodically consulted with regard to suspected cases of research misconduct and publishing ethics, such as fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism. Furthermore, at the present time, when ethical challenges such as diversity in science and access to care have reclaimed the attention of government bodies and scientific communities, the EEAC has an adjunct purpose to identify relevant topics from an ethical standpoint and bring forward the ESCMID's position and perspectives through official statements and publications.

Working specifically in the field of infectious diseases and clinical microbiology, the committee advises the EC on policies or actions in cases of disputes concerning conflicts of interest, the appeals process, or unethical conduct of ESCMID members or collaborators. The EEAC also has the duty to review specific documents concerning ethical principles pertaining to professional and scientific conduct, such as the ESCMID Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest (COI) disclosure and other guidance documents, including the manual for clinical practice guidelines. Other formal documents by the ESCMID are also reviewed to ensure appropriate COI reporting and gender balance of authors.

The EEAC can either advise the EC at its request or independently report to the EC regarding findings of unethical behaviour, inappropriate COI reporting, or gender inequities or imbalances involving ESCMID members or representatives. Final decisions and measures are eventually taken by common agreement between the EEAC and the EC.

Finally, the EEAC supports the educational mission of promoting the dialogue on IDE across different communities at a local and international level through the organization of conferences or courses (e.g. ESCMID Educational Courses).

Possibly because of the perception of the potential to cure, prevent, and contain infections through use of antibiotics, vaccines, and infection control measures, moderate consideration has been given to IDE, especially before the COVID-19 crisis of 2020 and particularly in comparison to other topics, such as euthanasia or

genetics [2]. For these reasons, and to better understand clinicians' and researchers' involvement in bioethics and define their perceptions of priorities and gaps in the field of IDE, the EEAC has launched an anonymous global survey (SurvEthics) open to ESCMID members and non-ESCMID members with an interest in the field of IDE. The SurvEthics is currently ongoing and can be accessed from the EEAC webpage [10]. The results of the survey will help to design a framework to approach ethical issues in infectious diseases in a more consistent and systematic way.

The EEAC can be approached through the ESCMID office in relation to any ethical issue or concern that is relevant to the field of infectious diseases and clinical microbiology and is open to international collaborations with other groups or experts.

Further information on the committee's members and their activities, key responsibilities, and terms of office are reported on the ESCMID website and included in the EEAC standard operating procedure [10].

In conclusion, working closely with the ESCMID EC, the EEAC serves as an independent advisor for disputes and ethical conflicts, revises and maintains relevant documents concerning members' conduct and COI, and represents the ESCMID scientific community at a local and global level, striving to promote high ethical standards in research in infectious diseases.

Transparency declaration

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