

Characterization of research ethics committees' members

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Abstract

Characterization of Research Ethics Committees' members

This is a quantitative and descriptive study with the objective of describing the participants of the Research Ethics Committees (CEP) of four Bahia State universities. Carried out with 25 key-informants, the obtained data indicated that CEP participants (full members, coordinators and secretaries) are predominantly of female gender (60%), with degrees in various areas, being Biological Science the most cited one, (16%), with 30 or more years of professional training (27,3%) and with doctors degree (44%). Among those who perform the position of full members, only 60% have participated of an event/course about Research Ethics. Considering that the training of CEP members is crucial for proper development of the committee activities, the study concluded that educational activities at the studied CEP are necessary, such as continued training programs, that require greater institutional support and investment for implementation, development and consolidation.

Key Words: Ethics. Research. Ethics committees. Ethical review. Bioethics. Education. Training.

Resumo

Caracterização dos integrantes dos comitês de ética em pesquisa

Trata-se de estudo quantitativo e descritivo com o objetivo de caracterizar os integrantes dos comitês de ética em pesquisa (CEP) das quatro universidades estaduais da Bahia. Realizado com 25 informantes-chave, os dados indicaram que os integrantes dos CEP (membros efetivos, coordenadores e secretários) são em sua maioria do sexo feminino (60%); possuem graduação em áreas variadas, sendo a mais citada Ciências Biológicas (16%); têm cerca de 30 ou mais anos de formação profissional (27,3%); possuem título de doutorado (44%). Dentre aqueles que exercem a função de membro efetivo, apenas 60% participaram de algum evento/course sobre ética em pesquisa. Considerando que a capacitação dos integrantes do CEP é fundamental para o bom desenvolvimento das atividades do comitê, o estudo concluiu que há necessidade de atividades educativas nos CEP estudados, como programas de capacitação continuada, as quais demandam maior apoio e investimento institucional para sua implantação, desenvolvimento e consolidação.

Palavras-chave: Ética em pesquisa. Comissão de ética. Revisão ética. Bioética. Ética. Educação. Capacitação.

Resumen

Caracterización de los componentes de comités de ética en investigación

Se trata de un estudio cuantitativo y descriptivo con el objetivo de caracterizar a los componentes de los CEP de las 4 universidades del Estado de Bahia. Realizado con 25 informantes, los datos obtenidos indicaron que los componentes de los CEP (miembros efectivos, coordinadores y secretarios) son en su mayoría de sexo femenino (60%), poseen graduación en diversas áreas, siendo la más citada Ciencias Biológicas (16%), tienen cerca de 30 o más años de formación profesional (27,30%) y título de doctorado (44%). Entre aquellos que ejercen la función de miembros efectivos, sólo el 60% participaron de algún evento/course sobre ética en investigación. Considerando que la formación de los miembros de los CEP es crucial para el correcto desarrollo de las actividades del Comité, el estudio concluyó que es necesario para las actividades educativas en el CEP estudiados, tales como programas de capacitación continuada para sus miembros, actividades éstas que demandan mayor apoyo e inversión institucional para su implantación, desarrollo y consolidación.

Palabras-clave: Ética en investigación. Comités de ética. Revisión ética. Bioética. Ética. Educación. Capacitación.

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Characterization of research ethics committees' members

Landmark of ethics review process in research involving human subjects in Brazil, the National Health Council (CNS) Resolution 196/96, created the CEP/Conep System, which comprises the Research Ethics committees (CEP) and the National Research Ethics Commission (Conep) ¹. This resolution is considered piece of bioethics essence, since it requires analysis and critical reflection of the values involved in research, turning mainly for the protection of human dignity, either a research participant or researcher ².

The Research Ethics committees (CEP) are collegiate bodies, with independence, which must function as social control agencies of research involving human subjects, in order to safeguard the research participants' rights and contributing to the achievement of research under high ethical standards ². Likewise, Conep is a collegiate body, with advisory, deliberative normative, educational, independent nature, linked to the CNS, which is responsible for CEP registration, analyzing the ethical aspects of research involving human subjects, adapting and updating the standards related to these researches, among other duties ³.

The functions of a CEP, which are multiple and diverse, do not limit to ethical review of project and involve their own members, researchers and even the outside community, as this body should also carry out research monitoring, educational and advisory activities, for example, and, thus, be ethical-scientific support instance to all who look for it. Its composition must encompass full members, a coordinator, a deputy coordinator and, at least, one secretary.

In order to get information about the composition and functioning of the CEP, as well as to verify the frequency of training of its members, it was designed a research project *Barriers and potentialities of the Research Ethics committees (CEPs) of Bahia's State universities*, developed by the authors. This article, drawn ⁴ from the results of that work, is based on the following guiding question: what are the characteristics of CEP members in the State of Bahia universities? To answer this question, the objective of characterizing the CEP members in the Bahia State universities was established.

In addition to outlining the profile of the CEP, the results aim to stimulate the improvement of State education institutions CEP and raise awareness for the need of provider institutions to support this initiative, aimed at consolidating ethical standards in research in Brazil.

Method

The study originating this article is the Master's degree dissertation *Barriers and potential of Research Ethics committees (CEP) of Bahia's State universities* ⁴, presented in 2010 and characterized as quali-quantitative and descriptive research, applied to four ethics committees in research in the State of Bahia.

CEP participating in the study operated in the following state higher education institutions: State University of Southwestern Bahia/Uesb (multi-campus institution, whose CEP is located in the city of Jequié); State University of Feira de Santana/Uefs (multi-campus institution, whose CEP is located in the city of Feira de Santana); State University of Santa Cruz/Uesc (located between the cities of Ilheus and Itabuna) and the State of Bahia University/Uneb (multi-campus institution, whose CEP is located in the city of Salvador).

It is important to highlight that two CEPs (Uefs and Uneb) are located in geographically close and encompassing areas, which correspond to higher concentration of CEPs in the city of Salvador, because, in addition to these, there are CEPs in other institutions, while the CEP of Uesb and Uesc, during the undertaking of the study, were the only ones of their areas of coverage: South and southwest regions of the State of Bahia, respectively.

The dissertation 'Barriers and potentialities of Research Ethics committees (CEP) of state universities of Bahia' involved the four axes of social authors related to CEP activity, which comprised two sample groups: researchers who have submitted and/or submit their research projects to the state universities of Bahia's CEP and members of these CEP. This study collected and analyzed qualitative data (the by-laws of three of the CEPs participating in the study) and multidimensional

quantitative referring to the CEP (infrastructure and functioning, educational dimension, characterization of research protocols and ethical review, characterization of its members and of researchers who submit projects to the CEP, conception of research ethics and importance attributed to CEPs by study participants), who comprised, each one, a subsection of the dissertation discussion⁴⁻⁸. Thus, only the adopted methodological steps for the composition of the sample of members of CEP and the results and discussion concerning the characterization of this dissertation sample group are presented.

The members of the CEP are full members, coordinators, secretaries and alternate members. Although integrating the CEP, the alternate members were not included in this study, because not every participant CEP had this category of members. Initially, to compose the sample of CEP members, the initial pages of the CEP were consulted for the assessment of the names of the full members, coordinators and secretaries. One of the CEP did not have web page in the period in which the data were collected and did not released the list of full members, hindering their invitation to participate in the study.

After the assessment of the members of the CEP studied, the full members that would be invited to participate in the research were chosen by draw. At a first draw, it was selected the area of expertise of the full members participating in the study. If more than one full member represented the drawn area of expertise, a second draw was held between the representatives of the same area of expertise to select the invitee to participate in the study. If the full member did not accept to participate in the study, a new draw was conducted among the other members of the selected area of expertise. As each CEP had only a coordinator and a secretary, all persons who occupied these roles were invited to participate in the study. However, only half of them -two from each group - accepted.

Data on the characteristics of those surveyed were collected through multidimensional questionnaire designed by Barbosa⁴, with question related to the CEP and characterization

of its members, while this dimension was the core of this study. It is important to highlight that each participant received a specific questionnaire for his category. The multidimensional questionnaires had common as well as specific questions to each category of study. This instrument was answered electronically, by email, in the period December 2009 to May 2010. The sample group consists of 25 individuals member of the CEPs, 21 of them were full members, two coordinators and two secretaries. Two of the CEPs were more receptive and there was good acceptance of its members to participate; the other two CEPs showed more resistant to collaborate with the research, which has hindered data collection and reduced the sample group size integrating the CEPs, of the 47 (initial forecast) to 25 - real sample. Thus, each of the two more accessible CEPs participated with 11 members, while in one of the most resistant CEP two members participated and of the other, just one.

All members of CEP invited to participate in the survey received an invitation email presenting the researcher, information about the importance of the research, and the Annex, a questionnaire specific to participant category and the term of free and informed consent (TCLE) to be read and returned signed, along with the questionnaire, in the case of agreement to collaborate with the research.

The information obtained from the questionnaires composed a database prepared in the *software Sphinx Lexica for Windows*, release 5.0, in Portuguese in which they were quantitatively analyzed using descriptive statistics and presented in tables.

Results and discussion

Barriers and potentialities of the composition of the CEPs members' sample group

Before submitting the mentioned Master's degree project to CEP, contact was established with the State of Bahia universities' CEPs, explaining that the project would consist, its importance, and how the participation of each CEP would be, inclusively with submission of a copy of the contract for the

participating CEPs.

At first, the CEPs agreed to participate in the research, considering it relevant, and indicating to the existence of potentialities and barriers in its functioning, as well as they agreed with the need for increased communication and integration between the state universities CEP⁴.

The project was approved by the CEP/Uesb in September 2009 and, after the qualifying examination and completion of pilot testing of instruments, data collection began in December 2009. At that moment, two of CEPs began to show resistance in collaborating with the research. One of them denied fully to cooperate by refusing to provide the email contacts needed to send the invitation to participate in the survey. The other CEP did not have a home page and reported that it was undergoing through structural problems and could only collaborate from March 2010. In March, other attempts to contact this CEP were made, all to no avail. Contact was accomplished only on the end of April 2010, by mobile telephone, and the CEP agreed to collaborate with the survey. Thus, the sending of requested information was waited, among which the list of full members and their respective emails. However, by the end of May 2010, we did not receive any reply from this CEP⁴.

Then, concerning the CEP that did not provide the listing of its full members on the internet or by other means, an attempt was made to identify these members through the Lattes platform, but without success because this platform does not have a specific search tool for locating CEP members.

One of the participants stressed that the CEP study would break the confidentiality of the opinions issued by it. As reply, it was argued that there was not request to access the opinions, or the list of projects and type of issued opinions. The other never specified their reasons, always stating that it was undergoing difficulties, that it would cooperate, but it did not. CEP resistance in participating in the study may have been motivated by the fact that these two CEPs were, at the time of the study, with cancellation notice in the Conep

due to lack of renewal of their registries⁴. However, after a period of interruption in their activities, both seem to have regularized their situation in the Conep, including the renewal of their coordination and of their full members as well. Additionally, all studied CEP have home pages now with instructions for the researcher and other stakeholders.

Thus, it is important to note that, according to one of the authors' experience at the CEP secretariat, to keep the semester reports and CEP registration updated is not an easy process. In spite of being numeric records of evaluated projects and quantitative types of issued opinions, experience indicates that it is easier to prepare monthly sub-reports to be consolidated in a semester report⁹ to avoid hardship in computing total amounts, since projects, in their processing by the CEP, may be considered as pending and approved later with compliance of pending by its responsible researcher.

CEP registration renewal is time-consuming, consuming and bureaucratic, because it depends on the review of its bylaws, documents from the institution's board that houses the CEP and of the entity indicating users representative, in addition to designation of members, as well as filling up some documents for submission to Conep¹⁰⁻¹². Because it demands discussion in the CEP plenary and not depend exclusively from it, experience evidences that preparation of this documentation should begin one year before the validity date of CEP registration in order to prevent it from working with expired registration and cease its functioning to regularize its situation, making researchers' work difficult and, thus, overloading closer CEPs.

In this context, it is important to reaffirm that it is through the study of CEPs that their barriers and potentialities may be evidenced, in order to contribute toward the improvement of these potentialities and reducing obstacles for the social control in research in Brazil to become more effective and comprehensive. This involves, among other things, the improvement of the functioning of existing committees, as well as the formation of new CEPs.

Regarding the type of projects assessed by the

CEP, the data obtained enabled to identify that the Majority of projects belongs to group III (91.78%) and from the area of expertise of Health Sciences (53.42%), consisting, mainly, of institutional research projects (33.5%) and of graduation monograph projects (20.9%)^{4,7}.

It is also noteworthy that after the completion of the study, it was possible to establish better communication with the CEPs, while this communication was closer among two of them and the CEP in which this study originated. Although it has not yet managed to end with all existing barriers, it is already perceptible punctual advances that allow believing that further improvements will come, even if they still rely on much commitment of each CEP and, indeed, in other scientific studies. In addition, recently, a new CEP, based in the southwestern region of Bahia, was registered in Conep: that of the Federal University of Bahia (U\a), located in the city of Vitória da Conquista. This new CEP can assist the CEP/Uesb, which has great demand for ethical review of projects in this region.

Finally, it is believed that, although the sample group in CEP has been limited, the results, described below, contribute to the knowledge of the relevant features of people integrating the CEP in Bahia State universities.

Characterization of CEP members in the Bahia state universities

The study encompassed several members of the CEPs: coordinators, full member, and secretaries. The majority of them, fifteen, are female (60%).

Table 1. Members' profile by gender

Gender	Amount	%
Male	10	40
Female	15	60
Total	25	100

Source: 'Entraves e potencialidades dos comitês de ética em pesquisa (CEP) das universidades estaduais da Bahia'. Jequié/BA, 2010.

As to the training area, three have graduated in Nursing or Dentistry, corresponding to 12% of the total in each of

these areas. The most frequently mentioned professional category was "biologist", equivalent to 16% of participants in the study.

Table 2. Participants profile by training area

Type of Professional training	No.	%
Biologist	4	16
Physiotherapist	1	4
Nurse	3	12
Dentist	3	12
Lawyer	1	4
Philosopher	1	4
Economist	1	4
Mathematician	1	4
Mechanical engineer	1	4
Historian	1	4
Sociologist	1	4
Civil engineer	1	4
Chemistry	1	4
Theologists	1	4
Portuguese professor	1	4
Physical educator	2	8
Did not reply	1	4
Total	25	100

Source: 'Entraves e potencialidades dos comitês de ética em pesquisa (CEP) das universidades estaduais da Bahia'. Jequié/BA, 2010.

Concerning time of Professional experience, six have around 30 years or more (27.3%). Regarding academic titling, eleven have doctorate (44%), according to tables 3 and 4, below.

Table 3. Participants profile by time of Professional experience

Timr from graduation/years	Nº	%
1 - 6	1	4,5
6 - 11	3	13,6
12 - 17	5	22,7
18 - 23	4	18,2
24 - 29	3	13,6
30 +	6	27,3
Total	22	100

Source: 'Entraves e potencialidades dos comitês de ética em pesquisa (CEP) das universidades estaduais da Bahia'. Jequié/BA, 2010.

Table 4. Participants profile by titling

Titling	Nº	%
High school	1	4
College graduate	1	4
Specialist	1	4
Master	1	4
Working in Master's degree	5	20
Working in Doctorate	4	16
Doctorate	11	44
Other	1	4
Total	25	100

Source: 'Entraves e potencialidades dos comitês de 12ca em pesquisa (CEP) das universidades estaduais da Bahia'. Jequié/BA, 2010.

The data in table 2 show the multi-professional character of CEP, as the diversity of training areas among members is very large, a total of 16. In fact, none of the most frequently mentioned professions (nurses, dentist, and biologist) has marked predominance over the others. Information relating to professional training and the titling also indicate that most of them have research experience.

Among 23 participants in this study (full members and coordinators), eight have about two years of expertise in the Committee, corresponding to 38.1%. Five operate in CEP for one year, corresponding to 23.8%; one (4.76%) works for three years and three (14.3%) of them for five years or more. There are also two participants in the study with four years (9.5%), as well as two (9.5%) others with less than one year of experience as CEP member. Two people did not answer the question and the secretaries were not included in this item (Table 5). It follows that there is rotation among CEP members, indicating the need for continued training.

Table 5. Time of work of CEP full members and coordinators

Time of work in CEP	Nº	%
- 1 year	2	9,5
1 year	5	23,8
2 years	8	38,1

3 years	1	4,8
4 years	2	9,5
5 years +	3	14,3
Total	21	100

Source: 'Entraves e potencialidades dos comitês de 12ca em pesquisa (CEP) das universidades estaduais da Bahia'. Jequié/BA, 2010.

Of the 21 members of the CEP participants in the study, three (15.8%) have already been alternates, while 16 (84.2%) never exercised this function. Two participants did not reply to this question and this same question was not included in the questionnaires sent to coordinators and secretaries. The existence of alternates in the CEP is important to assist the quorum of meetings and in periods of high demand for projects submitted to the CEP, allowing also that alternate acquires experience in ethical review of projects. Prior experience is crucial in acquiring essential experience to assume the condition of full member. When one already has some experience and training, it is possible to contribute more effectively to the CEP during the term. Coordinators spend, on average, 2.5 years as the Chairperson/coordination of CEP and secretaries, also on average 3.5 years exercising the function, while the full members spend approximately 2 years and three months.

These data indicate that the full members of CEP have varying levels of experience and that the Committee's composition is renewed partially, always existing full members with more and less experience as advocates the *Operational manual for research ethics committees* ³, which specifies that the renewal of members *must be partial to keep the already accumulated experience while renewing*. The average time of CEP coordinators and secretaries in exercising their functions also indicates that they have experience.

When we ask the full members and coordinators if they submit, their research projects to the CEP of which they are members, 11 (52.4 percent) said yes, while 10 (47.6%) denied doing so. Among the justifications reported for submission or not of the research project to the CEP and the existence or absence of difficulties related to this process, the following stand out;

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"My expertise and research area uses bibliographic material"; "Researches that I have developed do not involve live subjects"; "Before being a CEP member, I had difficulty for not understanding its dynamics, but now I do not have it"; "I had difficulty with clarifications related to partnership questionings".

These responses indirectly demonstrate the character of participants CEP in this multi-professional study, because not all full members conduct research involving human subjects. Additionally, they also clarify the importance of the CEPs educational role, notably the pedagogical function of the opinions issued by them, since these must be sufficiently clear so project researchers are able to understand them and the opinion will contribute to improving the ethical scientific research project examined. If doubts persist on the part of researchers, it is a CEP function to guide them so that they can resolve the issues identified in the opinion.

When asked about the reasons for becoming a CEP member, 11 full members and coordinators of studied CEP answered *"I want to represent my field of knowledge in the CEP"*, corresponding to 25%. The same number of participants replied *"I like research ethics"* and 10 of them stated that *"wanted to know how a CEP works"*, comprising 22.7% of the sample. It is important to remember that it was possible to participant in the research to point out as many alternatives as necessary and that 12 individual who had replied this question (27.3%) also chose to provide answers grouped in the alternative "other", of which the following stand out:

"I participated at the invitation of the academic community"; "Compulsory indication to integrate CEP because of teaching research disciplines in both undergraduate(one) and graduate degrees (three)"; "Conflicts between CEP and researchers"; "Ways of understanding the processes of research and its relation with the ethics, since ethics is something with which I have approached throughout my professional activity as professor"; "To acquire knowledge from other areas and contribute to my institution";

"Department nomination"; "Perceiving the need to contribute with the issue of ethics"; "Interaction with other areas"; "Acquire know-how in research".

Among study participants, only two were representatives of society, both belonging to the CEP most represented in the sample: one representative of users and the other who identified himself as representative of the community. It is important to stress that these two members of the CEPs carried out ethical review of projects, as well as participated in discussions at the plenary session of their CEPs. In addition, participation of the users' representative in all activities related to full member of CEP is important, given that such participation enables him to analyze more comprehensively the ethical dilemmas related to CEP, as well as to contribute more effectively to the protection of research subjects. This small number of representatives of society in sample translates the difficulties of many CEPs in having and maintaining its users' representative, since the institutions to which they are related do not understand always the CEP's role and the importance of their active participation in this agency^{13,14}.

In addition, the difficulties related to such individuals' employers are added, because work on the CEP is voluntary and all active member needs time to appraise projects and to participate in meetings. Although it is foreseen in the Resolution 196/96¹ that members of ethics committees should be freed of their activities to participate in the work of the CEP, it is known that this is not always the case. These facts, combined with the need for greater dissemination and awareness of the importance of a CEP and its role in the academic community and society, may result in difficulties concerning the indication of these representatives by municipal health councils and other social control entities, as well as obstacles to their effective participation in CEP, as the experience of one of the authors of this study points out in her five years of experience as a CEP secretary.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of ensuring users' participation in the committees, the unpaid work of its members, including users, it is essential to ensure the independent character of the CEP and the social control in research. Freitas and Novaes¹³ remind that the effective participation of CEP representatives enables users to evaluate better potential conflicts of interests and values between the different actors involved in research projects.

The nomination by department of the institution also was cited by some members of the CEP - coordinators and full members - as one of the reasons for being a member of the CEP. Oliveira¹⁵, when studying ten Brazilian CEPs, also found reports on nominations of members by departments and by coordinators and directors of the institutions housing the CEP. However, this same author alerts to the fact that the choice of the members requires mobilization and should contribute to socialize and democratize the CEP, in addition to expanding the debate on research ethics.

One should stress that the majority of the responses regarding the reasons why members joined CEP translates affinity for research ethics and bioethics, willingness to contribute with the development of the institution that houses the CEP, need for professional and in research improvement, search for interdisciplinarity and desire to learn more about the work of CEP. This shows the importance of the CEP educational role (inclusively related to critical-ethical training in research) and also the need for greater disclosure (particularly regarding the dynamics of functioning and ethical review of projects) and clarification of its role as the researcher's advisor and partner, as by approving a research project, the CEP becomes co-responsible for it.

When asked if they had participated in an event or course on research ethics, one full member did not respond to question, eight full members (40%) said they did not, while 12 (60%) responded positively. When we asked them to specify which courses/events they had participated, the following were mentioned: capacity-building training on research ethics, bioethics day,

National Meeting of Research Ethics committees (Encep), Extraordinary World Congress of the international Association of Bioethics, CLatin American and Caribbean Bioethics Network Congress, Ethics Meeting of the Nursing school of the Federal University of Bahia (Ufba), capacity-building for CEP new members, ethics courses in basic research and in research with humans and implementation of CEPs, unspecified graduate courses, doctoral and master's degree courses, and Bioethics course were mentioned as well.

Among the full members who participated in events or courses on research ethics, five (45.4%) are biomedical area, two from the exact sciences (18.1%) and four from Humanities (36.4%). However, the most quoted professional category was biologist, corresponding to 25% (3) of the sample of members who attended events and/or courses on research ethics.

The capacity-building of CEP members should be continued, taking place not only during meetings, but also on events and courses promoted by the CEP and during their academic training, in as much as, when ethically reviewing a protocol, the full member must have knowledge of research ethics to evaluate it scientifically and ethically^{1,3} — which can help him to realize the existence of conflicts of interest, the dimension of discomforts and/or risks, the potential benefits to the individual and/or collectiveness and if these are overlapping, in order to justify the research. Additionally, such care confer social relevance to research, preserving the rights, dignity and the biopsychosocial integrity of the participants in the study. In this sense, Rego et al. remind that a research *needs to have its importance acknowledged socially; while it is not sufficient that it is something that awakened the researcher's curiosity that the latter wishes to know more*¹⁶.

In this context, CEP activities and meetings should not targeted only the ethical review of research projects, but to provide spaces for ethical reflection also. According to Novaes and Guilhem¹⁷, the development of continued education programs for members of the CEP is essential so that the latter fulfils its role effectively and strengthens its practices for ethical review of research protocols.

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Furthermore, still according to these authors¹⁷, such programs should consider CEP members' skills, knowledge, behaviors and initial motivations in order that they feel encouraged to seek new knowledge that can subsidize them in discussions and meetings on their work in the CEP. When analyzing projects, they should put themselves in the place of all involved, researchers and research participants-and to advocate for the interests of the latter.

This conflict of the CEP members is discussed by Estellita-Lins: *The Committee lives, experiences the case* [research]. *It refers to a general theory and its fundamentals. It witness the deadlock of multiplicity and its numerous meanings and conflicts. Its highest task must be to refuse unreflective application of certain principles to some cases. The CEP must be able to witness this tension between technique and life, which cannot be resolved anymore by the concept of man, human or human beings*¹⁸.

To do so, among the forms of continuing training of members of the CEP, Freitas and Novaes¹³ indicate discussion of cases and topics, undertaking of seminars, courses, and peer meeting, in addition to the necessity and importance of greater integration of the CEP/Conep System.

Final considerations

In spite of not having achieved the number of participants initially planned for the composition of the sample of CEP members, it is assumed that the project originating this article has achieved its objectives to highlight the existence of barriers and potentialities in the functioning of the state universities of Bahia's CEPs, which also included the characterization of CEP members. We believe that the limitations of the sample size are indicative of the existence of barriers; however, we believe that denying and/or trying to hide the existence of these barriers is not the best way to seek ways to resolve them, or enhance the potentialities of the CEP.

By being an agency of social control in research, CEP activities must be carried out with transparency and efficiency, inclusively the CEP

itself being the object of research. CEP should not act as a censor and be closed in itself. Rather, it must assume the position of researchers' advisor and it should be always open to dialogue with them, as well as with the other CEPs. And through the exchange of experiences among CEPs and undertaking of researches on itself that subsidies to improve the committees' potentialities will be obtained, going toward resolution of barriers to its full operations, thus, contributing to raise the ethical Standards of the Brazilian researches even more.

Data obtained in the study allowed to realize the existence of professional diversity among individuals who work in the CEO and the full members, who do not carry out research involving human beings among its members (47.6%). These aspects show the multi-professional character of CEPs, as recommended by Resolution 196/96, which is fully enforced in this aspect.

Additionally, the majority of CEP full members has about two years of work (38.1%) and 15.8% have been already alternate members, which shows full member's relative experience in the function, also pointing to the existence of renewal and with varying levels of experience. Among the reasons of permanent members and coordinators participating in this research to be part of the CEP, most indicated the desire to represent their area of expertise in the CEP (25%) and have interest in research ethics (25%).

Another aspect worth noting is the fact that, among the CEP members who participated in the study, it included two representatives of users, which issued opinions for the projects and participated in the discussions of the CEP plenary. This favorable situation, however, is not common. Our experience as researchers, as well as CEP members, indicates the existence of difficulties in studied committees to maintain their users' representatives. This is a feature proposed by the Resolution 196/96, which, we believe, deserves more study and reflection.

The fact that just 60% of the members of surveyed CEP have participated in an event and/or course on ethics, and the small number of representatives of the society among participants of

this study, reflects the need to undertake more educational activities in surveyed CEPs, developed to involve committee's members, the academic community and society. The activities geared to continued training could minimize, inclusively, the difficulty of many CEP in nominating and maintaining its users' representative. However, continued training activities for CEP members require institutional support and investment in the development and consolidation of the CEPs. Due to lack of institutional support, the studied CEPs still work under precarious way.

Thus, despite the CEP/Conep System represent a major effort in the development of researches involving humans in Brazil, challenges still remain to enhance the management of the system in order to make it more encompassing, and ethical review more agile and qualified². The increasingly need of continued training processes for all of its member stands out.

CEPs are crucial for developing research in all sectors of knowledge in Brazil, indispensable for the country's scientific and technological progress, as

well as for the enhancement and qualification of the graduate programs through streamlining knowledge on research ethics¹⁹. Thus, committees' members training should be promoted continuously by the institutions housing them. Additionally, it is crucial that CEPs get suitable institutional support to carry out successfully their functions, performing their role with quality, speed and efficiency, which involves the continued improvement of all of their full members, coordinators, secretaries, and alternates.

In order to implement this effective and constant capacity-building, institutional support and continued financing is crucial. This would help both optimizing CEP activities and stimulating the undertaking of research targeted to outline the profile of ethics committees' members, aiming at establishing effective strategies to improve their background in order to perform the committees' activities. The characterization of these members is basic for planning and executing actions capable to contribute for its continued training process.

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Authors participation in the article

Adriana Barbosa designed, developed the research, and wrote the text. Rita Boery was the advisor for the dissertation Project, and responsible for text correction. Douglas Leonardo participated in the critical discussion and contributed with amendments to the original text, particularly regarding ethical issues and Portuguese language;



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