

Ethics Information from the National Health & Medical Research Council Covid-19 impacts

Aboriginal organisations across Western Australia are focussed on the COVID-19 pandemic. In recognition of this, it is advisable for researchers to reconsider all research activities that draw on the resources of these organisations.

All researchers must abide by public health advice provided by the Australian Government and by WA Health, and all Federal and jurisdictional laws, regulations and directives, particularly those concerning Aboriginal communities. This applies to all research projects with existing ethics approval from the WAAHEC.

Amendments to existing research projects resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic may be submitted for out of session consideration.

New Applications

If an HREC considers new proposed research to be inadvisable in the current environment, either as designed or with necessary modifications to accord with public health guidelines, then it is within the HREC's discretion to decline to approve the project.

The HREC may also choose to indicate an in-principle acceptance of the merits and design of the research, but defer its approval until circumstances permit approval and commencement of the research.

Amendments to Applications

Where proposals have been submitted for review, HREC requests for modifications to protocols that are designed to limit physical contact between researchers or staff and participants (or between participants and each other) are entirely appropriate.

If researchers feel that such changes should be put in place subsequent to approval, but prior to commencement of the research, then the change does not need to be approved by HRECs before being implemented. Participant and staff safety are the paramount concerns in all cases.

Amendments to existing protocols that are designed to limit physical contact between researchers or staff and participants (or between participants and each other) or to change methodology, procedures or project activity to ease the burden on participants, researchers or staff do not need to be approved by HRECs before being implemented, if timing does not enable this.

In addition, necessary amendments that suspend recruitment or testing of participants, or that modify research locations or staffing and other administrative matters can be implemented as necessary. If there is time for an amendment of this type to be reviewed in accordance with existing administrative amendment approval processes, that is optimal, but, again, participant and staff safety are the paramount concerns in all cases. If such changes are made, they should be reported, when that becomes possible, to the HREC in accordance with usual processes and in conformance with National Statement 5.2.26.

However, if a planned modification of a protocol is likely to have a negative impact on participants' safety or increase risk to participants, then review by an HREC, or an approved delegated process, may be required. The identification of an individual, such as the HREC Chair or the most senior ethics officer, needs to make the decision as to whether a review is required prior to implementation of the proposed change. Substantial amendments would be submitted and approved by the HREC or via delegation as per normal processes authorised by the institution.

As a general statement, NHMRC recommends timely communication between institutions and researchers about all proposed protocol or process changes, either planned or implemented, to respond to the challenges of conducting research in this new environment.

Please direct inquiries to:
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