

Incorporating attention to gender equity in the work of local research ethics committees in Europe: a case study of ethical review practices

Clara J. Moerman¹ Joke A. Haafkens¹ Margareta Soderstrom² Eva Rasky³ Peggy Maguire⁴ Ulrike Maschewsky-Schneider⁵ Maria Norstedt² DaphneHahn⁵ Hadwig Reinerth⁵ Nessa McKevitt⁴

¹ Academic Medical Center - University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

²Department of Medicine, University of Lund, Sweden

³Institute of Social Medicine and Epidemiology, Karl-Franzens Universitat, Graz, Austria

⁴European Institute of Women's Health, Dublin, Ireland

⁵Berlin Centre of Public Health, Technische Universitat Berlin, Berlin, Germany

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Objective. To explore how local research ethics committees (RECs) in Austria, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden pay attention to gender equity in their work by asking two questions: 1. Do the existing procedures address the representation of women and gender expertise in the committee, and 2. Do the existing procedures pay attention to equitable inclusion of women and men in protocol evaluation.

Methods: Per country two RECs were selected. Data were obtained through interviews with key informants and content analysis of relevant documents (laws and regulations, guidelines, review tools in use in 2003).

Results: All countries have informal, sometimes formal rules to ensure the presence of women in the committee; gender expertise is not sought for. Drug study protocols are carefully evaluated on the inclusion of women of childbearing age, sometimes on a formal basis (law, application form). Some RECs also pay attention to the exclusion of one sex or inclusion of specific groups of women. Such attention is neither defined in regulations nor integrated in review tools.

Conclusions: Existing procedures do not actively support attention to gender equity in the work of RECs. To bring the procedures in line with the EU-commitment to gender equality in all policies and the global consensus on research ethics, EU Member States should formalize 1. attention to equitable participation of both sexes as reviewers, 2. attention to equitable inclusion of both sexes as research participants, 3. inclusion of gender expertise in the committee.