WHO HIFA-EVIPNet monthly rendezvous
N°2 : Health ethics

(I) Key points
No comprehensive definition of health ethics exists, but the concept includes the following elements:

- Various applications of ethical principles in the health sphere (ranging from public health to clinical practice);
- Clinical ethics and care includes the study and resolution of conflicts between competing values, rights and duties;
- Professional ethics has to do with the mission of public health, i.e. health protection and promotion. It is the ethics of public health practitioners;
- Applied ethics, guidance on ethical practice;
- Ethical advocacy means taking a stand in favour of objectives, actions and reforms to achieve the moral goals of public health;
- Critical ethics or open discussion to resolve issues and strengthen civic capacity;
- Research ethics.

What is the difference between public health ethics and clinical ethics?
- 1. In public health, initiatives originate from health professionals, not the patient;
- 2. Because the target of interventions is the population as a whole, advantages for individuals tend to be negligible;
- 3. Public health interventions can be so omnipresent that it is hard for individuals to participate in them;

- Capitalize on lessons learnt and preserve experience;
- Need to encourage decision-making mechanisms adapted to public health challenges.

Example of good practice:
Encourage organizations, and especially civil society, to obtain certification of compliance with the HONcode Code of Conduct, thereby contributing to transparency of editorial content on the Internet. The mission of HON is to help individuals, medical professionals and health facilities to use the best resources of the Internet to leverage the advantages and diversity of this hitherto unparalleled tool for knowledge and education. HONcode certification is a moral commitment to divulge editorial information. It demonstrates a site’s willingness to publish health information that is useful, objective and factually correct.
(II) Summary of the discussions

In the course of this week, we have examined all aspects of the issue and shown the importance of health ethics through the following:

- Addressing issues relating to access to treatment in sub-Saharan Africa;
- Strengthening ethics training at institutional level;

We have also held an exchange of views on current challenges:

- Research ethics, specifically the issue of access to research benefits;
- Harmonization between universal ethical principles;
- Clinical ethics, patient care and patients’ rights;
- Ethics are a necessity, not a luxury;
- Awareness of the importance of this ethical analysis in day-to-day work;
- Training of key stakeholders to share this concern with others;
- Engage activists for ethics in field-based programmes, not just in academic debates.

WHO has placed ethics at the heart of its mission to protect and promote the health of communities all over the world, and **one of the six core functions of WHO is to develop evidence-based ethical policies.** More specifically, this means:

- Making ethics a multidisciplinary approach with all stakeholders round the table;
- Raising awareness among professionals and decision-makers of the need to minimize specific inequalities that are not always based on money but arise from cultural change;
- Initiating a debate with all the parties concerned;

Main responses by WHO experts to questions from the HIFA-EVIPNet forum:

- The individual is at the centre of health care and ethical questions, the issue is not simply one of access to medicines and treatment;
- Universal health coverage is a priority for the Organization, with the goal of ensuring equitable access to quality care;
- There is a unit in WHO that deals with ethics issues internally on the basis of the Organization’s code of conduct, and also conflicts of interest;
- A number of World Health Assembly resolutions address the issue of counterfeit medicines, under the responsibility of the Essential Medicines department;
- A number of research ethics committees have been established, in addition to national ethics committees at country level;
- The role of WHO is to provide concrete assistance to countries, thereby enabling them to carry out programmes in accordance with regulatory frameworks.

Principal contributions by members:

- It is a shame that not all WHO standards have been translated into French;
- The importance of professional ethics is neatly captured by the term "code of professional ethics";
- The importance of scientific integrity;
- The importance of having independent civil society organizations that can bring to bear a critical and ethical perspective.