

THE FERCAP STORY: A DECADE OF FRUITFUL COLLABORATION WITH PARTNERS IN ETHICAL HEALTH RESEARCH*

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As we celebrate the 10th year anniversary of the *Forum for Ethical Review Committees in the Asian & Western Pacific Region* (FERCAP), it is but apt that we look back to our beginnings and look towards our future as a regional forum. Having served as FERCAP's Founding Chair and being one of the "older" members of the forum, I would like share with you the FERCAP story of fruitful collaboration with partners in ethical health research.

In this short article, I will present a brief history of FERCAP as well as provide you with an overview of the forum's main activities during the last decade. I will also share some of my thoughts regarding the forum's future.

Brief History of FERCAP

FERCAP was first conceived during a *World Health Organization (WHO)-sponsored Seminar on the Ethical Review of Clinical Research in Asian and Western Pacific Countries* held at Chiangmai, Thailand on August 2-4, 1999. In that seminar coordinated by Dr. Juntra Karbwang-Laothavorn, it was observed that although the concern for human subject protection in health research began quite a

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long time ago as proven by the history of international ethical guidelines, there were obvious weaknesses in human subject protection in developing countries. It was noted that there were no ethics committees (ECs)/institutional review boards (IRBs) in some developing countries while there were few ECs/IRBs in most developing countries. It was also observed that there were no standard operating procedures (SOPs) for ECs/IRBs in most Asia-Pacific countries. Most ECs/IRBs in the region focused on initial review of research protocols without proactive continuous review. Based on these observations, we concluded that we need to develop capacity in human subject protection in our region as soon as possible. But the question is how?

In our discussions during the seminar, we noted that working with government will be very difficult and very slow because of too much red tape. So instead of working with government, we chose to start from scratch and create our own organization starting with the participants of the seminar. We planned to meet again in Bangkok, Thailand five months later. During the waiting period, Francis Crawley prepared the terms of reference (TOR) for FERCAP and drafted the *Operational Guidelines for Ethics Committees that Review Biomedical Research* (WHO/TDR, 2000) which became our *Silver Book*.

The TOR was agreed upon by the founding members of FERCAP at its *First General Assembly*, following the *Meeting on Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures for Ethical Review* organized by the WHO/*Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases* (TDR) and *Thammasat University* (TU) in Bangkok, Thailand on January 10-12, 2000. The approval of the TOR on January 12, 2000 marked the official founding of FERCAP. The first Steering Committee was elected and composed of myself as Chairperson, Dr. Leonardo de Castro of the Philippines as Vice-Chairperson, Dr. Vasantha Muthuswamy of India as Secretary, Dr. Kesara Na-Bangchang of Thailand as Treasurer, Dr. Gemiliano Aligue of the Philippines as Education Officer, Peter Sy of the Philippines as Communication Officer, and Dr. Cheng Ping of China, Dr. Suriadi Guwanan of Indonesia, Dr. Kenji Hirayama of Japan, and Dr. Mahani Mansor Clyde of Malaysia as Member Representatives (FERCAP, 2000).

Main Activities of FERCAP

FERCAP's main activities revolved around efforts in support of the establishment of national ECs/IRBs in the Asia-Pacific region. In relation to this, we organized annual conferences as well as training courses for EC/IRB members. We assisted ECs/IRBs in preparing their SOPs. We also encouraged the translation of the *Silver Book* into several Asian languages. For continuous EC/IRB improvement, we helped develop the handbook *Surveying and Evaluating Ethical Review Practices* (WHO/TDR, 2002), the companion for the *Silver Book* which became our *Blue Book*.

FERCAP also expanded its activities beyond the Asia-Pacific region. We assisted in the formation of the *Strategic Initiative for Developing Capacity in Ethical Review* (SIDCER), a global network of independently established regional fora for ECs/IRBs with a common interest in the development of ethical review. We also worked with other regional fora such as the *Pan-African Bioethics Initiative* (PABIN), *Forum for Ethics Committees in the Confederation of Independent States* (FECCIS), *Foro Latino Americano de Comites de Etica en Investigacion en Salud* [Latin American Forum of Ethics Committees in Health Research] (FLACEIS), and the *Forum for Institutional Review Boards [IRBs]/Ethics Review Boards [ERBs] in Canada and the United States* (FOCUS).

In collaboration with SIDCER, we spearheaded the *SIDCER Recognition Program*, a global program that promotes good ethical review practices in health research among ECs/IRBs by implementing international criteria for surveying and evaluating ethical review practices (SIDCER, 2005; WHO/TDR, 2005). In the Asian region, 73 ECs/IRBs have already been recognized (FERCAP, 2010). To facilitate our collaboration with these recognized ECs/IRBs, we formed the *Network of Asian Recognized Ethics Committees* (NAREC) as a subcommittee within FERCAP composed of ECs/IRBs from Bhutan, China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand.

All these successful collaboration with partners in ethical health research would not have been possible without the hardworking efforts of some key FERCAP members. Foremost among these key members

are Dr. Juntra, the “mastermind” behind the establishment of FERCAP and Francis, the “philosopher” who drafted the forum’s foundational documents. Through the years, we are also lucky to have among our ranks Dr. Vasantha, Dr. Suriadi, Dr. Kenji, Dr. Mary Ann Lansang and Dr. Cristina Torres of the Philippines, Dr. Anoja Fernando of Sri Lanka, Dr. Benjamin Kou of Taiwan, and Dr. Kesara who provided us with strong leadership. Dr. Heidi Liu of China and Atoy Navarro of the Philippines also provided the forum with a strong Secretariat under the leadership of Dr. Cristina.

Looking back, choosing the right persons who provide FERCAP with strong leadership and management is one of our keys to success. Having the cooperation and support from our members is also an important key for our fruitful collaboration with partners in ethical health research. We all work in effective, efficient, and transparent manner to provide the right activities that adhere to the right principles and practices for ethical health research. The right people, the right activities, and the right principles and practices -- these are our keys to success.

The Future of FERCAP

Although a lot has improved, the capacity for ethical review in the Asia-Pacific region still needs continuous and further development especially in the face global challenges in ethical health research. We in FERCAP must remain strong to continue to play our important role in the capacity building and quality improvement of ECs/IRBs in our region.

To keep FERCAP strong and make us even stronger, we need the strongest commitment from our members in every country to adhere to our principles and practices, maintain our main activities, support our Steering Committee and Secretariat, and encourage more and more participation from our present and future members.

With the strongest commitment from our members in every country, I see more and more decades of fruitful collaboration with partners in ethical health research.

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