

# POST EARTH QUAKE MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Abdul Wahab Yousafzai, Syed Ahmer

On October 8, 2005 an estimated 15,000 children were orphaned by the quake that killed more than 73,000 people across northern Pakistan's mountains. Many of the survivors, both children and adults, have been traumatized. They have seen their parents being crushed in the rubble of their houses and dying. Some require long term rehabilitation, such as those with spinal injuries.

The national and international healthcare workers responded swiftly to this tragic event. But the long term effect of stress compounded by grief, the loss of social network, and the diminishing material support resulting directly or indirectly from traumatic events could increase the incidence of mental illnesses<sup>1</sup>.

The causal pathways, leading from trauma to full blown psychological consequence upon the death of a spouse or child, socioeconomic crisis, or physical disability and sickness, have been extensively discussed in the western literature<sup>2</sup>, but the western research may not be relevant to us, It is, therefore, very important that research be conducted on the mental health aspects of October 8 earthquake in the perspective of proper research questions, relevant to our culture<sup>3</sup>.

But the question is what will be code of research ethics for us in this situation? Is there a system of moral principles or rules of conduct according to which an action can be judged right or wrong.<sup>4-5</sup> Are there any guidelines, which cover post disaster research? The International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) has not issued any guidelines for research into the effects from traumatic event<sup>6</sup>.

**Abdul Wahab Yousafzai**, Department of Psychiatry, Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, Stadium Road, PO Box 3500, Karachi-74800, Pakistan.

E-mail: wahab.yousafzai@aku.edu

**Syed Ahmer**, MRC Psych, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, Stadium Road, PO Box 3500, Karachi-74800, Pakistan.

## Correspondence:

Dr. Abdul Wahab Yousafzai

In our part of the world India and Srilanka have research guidelines, but while there are no such guidelines available in Pakistan as yet, they are in the process of being formulated<sup>7</sup>. At the same time there is scarcity of ethics review committees and the research is mostly unsupervised, unstructured, and without an approved protocol by ethics review committees. Similarly the outcomes of research is likely to be influenced by the need to impress at the conferences; publication as a requirement for promotion or for the funding from some NGO/Pharmaceutical company.

International ethical guidelines for biomedical research involving human subjects prepared by the Council for International Organization of Medical Sciences(CIOMS) in collaboration of World Health Organization(WHO) states following principles for ethical research;

Before undertaking research in a population or community, the sponsor and the investigator must make every effort to ensure that: the research is responsive to the health needs and the priorities of the population or community in which it is to be carried out; and any intervention or product developed, or knowledge generated, will be made reasonably available for the benefit of that population or community<sup>8</sup>.

Looking at this statement of internal research guidelines there are four critical areas which are important and of potential harm to the research participants especially in the context of trauma research. These areas are:

- Decisional capacity of participants
- Vulnerability of research subjects
- Risks and benefits of research participation
- Informed consent

Usually during the exciting process of research the researcher can feel on the verge of an exciting discovery and delve more deeply. This delving process could be intrusive and harmful as exploration of traumatic events is a sensitive area even with carefully designed questionnaires and measures<sup>9</sup>.

Probing/explorative interviews are an essential component of research into trauma effects. The researcher can not know in advance the course of the interview. It is also difficult to predict the effect of the inquiry on the participant<sup>10</sup>.

Another area where likelihood of harm to the participant is the insistence on informed consent has come about after abuses of the human rights of participants in research. The informed consent applies to:

- The decision to participate
- knowledge of the likely consequences of participation; and
- information given about the purposes of the research and the use that will be made of the "data".

Most professional bodies and research institutions recommend the following guidelines to protect participant from exploitation and harm and safeguards their rights.

1. Adherence to an articulated Code of ethics;
2. Informed consent to be used - this is much more than a signed statement to proceed and
3. Developing an awareness of researcher dilemmas in human inquiry.

Any research into the mental health impact of the earthquake trauma will have to incorporate these guidelines. Mental health research in to the effect of October 8 2005 earth quake is important, but to ensure regard for standards in research by following guidelines and ethical code is even more important.

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