

Brief Communication

Virtual ethics committee meeting during the COVID-associated lockdown – Madras Diabetes Research Foundation Experience

INTRODUCTION

The ethics committee (EC) has a vital role in an efficient review of biomedical and health research to protect the safety and well-being of participants and further to ensure research integrity and reliability of research findings. All institutions and organizations which carry out biomedical and health research should establish an institutional EC; meetings are held periodically with all the members physically present and should maintain records under the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) guidelines.^[1] In April 2020, the ICMR Bioethics Unit, National Centre for Disease Informatics, and Research had also released National Guidelines for EC Reviewing Biomedical and Health Research during the COVID-19 pandemic. It stated that ongoing and new research, apart from COVID-19 related research, and which needs ethical review can be done through virtual EC meetings by fulfilling quorum requirements.^[2] Many ECs started conducted of their meeting via videoconferences using different platforms such as Zoom, Skype, WebEx, and CISCO Online.^[3] We present our experience of conducting EC meeting using an online platform during COVID-19 pandemic at our center.

METHODS

The first virtual EC meeting was held on May 09, 2020, via video conferencing using a WebEx online platform during the COVID-19 lockdown. The agenda for the meeting was sent by electronic mail and further each member was informed telephonically about the virtual EC meeting. EC dossier consisting of the following – study protocol, investigator's brochure, and informed consent form (both in English and Tamil language versions), participants' information sheet was distributed to all the EC members in advance as per the standard operating procedure. A dummy run was conducted before the actual virtual EC meeting so that there were no concerns about the use of technology-screen sharing, audio and video

aids during the virtual EC meeting. A feedback form was shared with all EC members by electronic mail and the responses were collected. Statistical analysis was done using SPSS version 22.0 SPSS Software (IBM, Chicago, III.USA). version. Mean and standard deviation for quantitative, frequencies, and percentages for qualitative variables were calculated.

RESULTS

A total of 15 participants responded to the feedback and 33% of participants used laptops, 27% used tablets, 20% desktop computers, and 20% mobile phones to attend the virtual meeting. The mean age of participants was 59.5 ± 10.4 years. All participants felt that the materials provided before the meeting was helpful and 60% of them were extremely satisfied. The audio quality was extremely satisfied with 60% of the participants. It is interesting to note that 60% of participants were extremely satisfied in attending the meeting from their home or office location in a comfortable manner. About 60% of participants attended the virtual meetings previously and 13% of participants reported connectivity issues during the meeting. All participants were willing to attend the virtual EC meetings in future.

DISCUSSION

Virtual meetings, as compared to physical meetings, can have advantages such as monetary and time savings since it avoids travel and also decreases carbon footprints. Besides, it allows the committee members to attend meetings from their office or home as per convenience and allows the possibility of recording presentations and meeting deliberations for future viewing. The disadvantages of virtual meetings are that it does not have direct person-to-person connection and deliberations, and further online platforms may have concerns of security (files and documents shared incorrectly with third parties or nonmembers, potential for hacking of computers, etc.) Further, all the EC members may not be familiar with the use of technology related to online

meetings, and often platforms require good-quality equipment (computers, laptops, etc.) and uninterrupted internet connection as it can lead to disconnection and poor audio video quality. Ghooi, 2020, reported that EC meeting via video conferencing via skype has poor audio and video quality, subsequently used Zoom; still, there are confidentiality concerns during data exchange.^[3] However in our EC meeting, we did not face these challenges or situations and members were overall very satisfied with the conduct of virtual EC meeting.

In future, the conduct of regular virtual EC meetings is very convenient for members who can participate from the convenience of their own offices or home locations, with the added advantage of time and cost savings.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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