Of "Guinea-Pigs" and Scientists

ETHICS: Research involving human beings is now the subject of an article in the Swiss Constitution. The relevant Federal Act (Loi fédérale relative à la recherche sur l’être humain - LRH) was approved by Parliament on 30 September 2011. Given the major stakes of this law, the EPFL Ethics Committee has decided to outline its key elements for the benefit of the EPFL community.

Chantal Döré
On behalf of the EPFL Ethics Committee

The LRH aims to protect the dignity, personal integrity and health of human beings in research (Art. 1) in accordance with international standards. The new Federal Act therefore enshrines in the law such existing principles as transparency and the informed consent of the "subject" who volunteers to participate in a research project. The law also confirms that research protocols should be screened by an ethics committee (in Canton Vaud, the Commission cantonale d’éthique de la recherche sur l’être humain - CER).

Research on human beings includes not only projects which directly involve individuals (e.g. by testing drugs), but also those which require biological material (e.g. hair, tissue or body fluids), as well as any other research in any field involving the participation of humans via prototype testing, surveys or behavioural studies.

Although some of the latter types of research involving human beings in a non-invasive way may be beyond the scope of the LRH, the fundamental rights of the various actors remain applicable. And where the purpose of an investigation requires involving consenting subjects, the individuals involved in tests are entitled to know all the stakes of the research project.

As soon as a human being becomes a research subject, there is a risk of harm, and the greatest damage is not necessarily to physical integrity. No research is without risk: testing a sensor may identify a problem in an individual presumed healthy, and a questionnaire may pose a problem in an individual presumed healthy, and a questionnaire may cause death or trauma to the research subject. An individual who agrees to be involved in experiments carries a risk: testing a sensor may identify a problem in an individual presumed healthy, and a questionnaire may be used without their knowledge.

In the specific field of collecting personal data from human subjects, the investigator’s interest must not be at the subject’s expense. In those cases, the obligation to guarantee the protection of research subjects stands, just as it applies to biomedical research (Art. 25 of the Law on Public Health of Canton Vaud), as enforced by applicable legislation and monitored by ethics committees.

The regulation of research, which is currently restricted to biomedical research, will be extended to human beings with the entry into force of the LRH, probably in summer 2013. The scope of this Federal Act, which includes research on the structure and functioning of the human body, already covers many experiments conducted by EPFL labs.

Research must be excellent but also ethically above reproach, whether the law enshrining this principle is applicable or about to come into force.

Three fundamental ethical principles should govern research involving human beings: respect for persons, beneficence (and "do no harm") and social justice. Respect for the individual affirms the latter’s autonomy, right to information and ability to make informed choices. The beneficence principle aims to ensure the subject’s well-being and minimise any risks involved in the framework of the experiment. Finally, the principle of social justice recognises the individual’s true value. Investigators should select subjects in all fairness and without any discrimination.

The ethical screening of a research project should make it possible to be aware of all inherent risks. The EPFL Ethics Committee recommends that all EPFL scientists systematically conduct an ethical evaluation of all research projects involving human beings, whether the experiment is invasive or not.

According to applicable cantonal law, all biomedical research projects involving human beings are supposed to be approved by the CER. This ethics committee is the only official body in Canton Vaud entitled to approve such projects. Duly approved research projects are given a CER authorisation number.

For research protocol submission procedures, information and references, please look up the website:


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