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Needs Assessment of IRBs in Liberia

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Introduction: Fourteen years of civil war (1989-2003), followed by the West African Ebola outbreak (2014-2016), undermined Liberia's health infrastructure, health workforce, and higher education system. In the five years since, the health system has demonstrated capacity for implementing high-quality, health-related research through several institutions. The research landscape of Liberia is growing among students, residents, and faculty. For this reason, the procedures and policies of institutional review boards (IRBs) must be clear. However, there is no centralized source of information on these critical guidelines. As a part of the USAID PEER Liberia project, an objective for the Practicum experience was to conduct and evaluate a needs assessment to understand what research ethics principles and practical skills were lacking in the Liberian IRBs.



Methods: Using a survey instrument developed at Vanderbilt University Medical Center to plan research ethics education programs in international settings, a 68-item questionnaire was administered via REDCap to the members of four of Liberia's IRBs, through an email listserv of active committee members. There were two sections of the survey. The first section gauged the member's knowledge of current levels of understanding of different topics of relevance for the research ethics review process, together with their current interest in and need for further training on each topic area. The second section was sent to those members who held a position as President, Vice President, or Secretary of their respective IRB. Overall, there were 36 respondents.

Results: The main additional training areas were ethical principles in research and administrative review of protocols. Using the knowledge learned from the needs assessment, meetings with the leadership of the IRBs occurred. In these meetings, the objective was to start a conversation about the structure and duties of the IRBs. Following these gatherings, four sessions took place to address the concerns of the IRB members.

Conclusions: Liberian IRBs will be prepared, protected, and empowered with additional training in human subjects' research and ethical protocols during emergencies. In the future, as the structure and protocols of the IRBs are strengthened, the academic scene in Liberia will continue to thrive.