Ethics Committees
Following revelations at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials of Nazi human research atrocities, codes of ethical behaviour in research were drawn up across the globe, the best-known of which are the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Helsinki (last revised in 2008).

In June 1966, Dr Henry Beecher, Emeritus Professor of Anaesthesiology at Harvard Medical School, published an article in the New England Journal of Medicine exposing current unethical human research behaviour and recommended the establishment of institutional committees to screen human research proposals to protect the rights of research participants.

Four months later, Professor John Hansen of the Department of Paediatrics persuaded Wits to establish such a committee. This was a decade before any other institution in South Africa did the same. Indeed, the Committee is the oldest in the southern hemisphere, and one of the oldest in existence. It is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC) and with the United States Office of Human Research Protections.

The Committee must ensure that all human research undertaken by staff and students in the Faculty of Health Sciences or in hospitals or clinics, by staff or students of any faculty, is safe, ethical, soundly based, and respects individual rights. The national human research ethics guidelines followed may be viewed at www.nhrec.org.za.

Applications for general research are made through the Wits Research Office on the East Campus (+27 11 717 1234) or through the branch office at the Medical School (+27 11 717 2700). Clinical trials are managed through the Wits Health Consortium (details are at www.witshealth.co.za).

Meetings are held on the last Friday of the months of January through to November in the Faculty of Health Sciences. Applications submitted by the seventh of a month are normally considered in the same month. Applicants are notified of the outcome of their application about ten working days after a meeting. Members of the Committee may be contacted for advice on applications before submission. Indeed, this is recommended. Contact details of the members may be obtained through the Wits Research Office.

A noteworthy event during 2012 was an independent audit of the Committee of the NHREC in common with 32 other registered research ethics committees. The audit outcome of the Committee was excellent, demonstrating once again Wits' leadership in this area.
Conducting academic research that involves human participants is not new. Interviews, questionnaires, and long-standing participant observation of behaviours and communities are well-established methodologies in the social sciences and the humanities through which to make sense of social processes.

Over the last few years, however, there has been an increased interest in involving human participants in a variety of other disciplines. Engineering is just one example. As a result, it is imperative to oversee that the research conducted under the aegis of Wits University is ethical.

This means first and foremost that individuals voluntarily agree to participate in research projects, and are in no way coerced with money or other means. Ethical research also entails that individuals should never be worse off as a result of their participation in the study. Quite the contrary, they should be able to see that there will be some long-term benefit for society by participating. An ethical approach to research also requires sensitivity to issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Particular attention should be taken when researching vulnerable groups such as children, prisoners, sex workers, refugees, victims of crime and others.

For these reasons, the University has a standing Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), which is separate from the committees for medical and animal research and biosafety. The Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) meets monthly and reviews 200 to 250 applications a year, under the Chairpersonship of Professor Tommaso Milani, a scholar in the field of gender and sexuality. The Committee considers applications from staff and students who intend to conduct research which involves human participants. Because of its broad composition, which includes members from a range of very diverse disciplines, the Committee encompasses a collective corpus of expertise which few can match in this relatively young field in South Africa.

The Institutional Biosafety Committee (IBC) was established about 10 years ago in order to review all University research involving recombinant DNA technology in accordance with the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines. Also included is research using infectious agents or other potentially biohazardous material. The overall purpose is therefore to identify potential risks to the safety of the general public and that of staff and students. It is essential to comply with NIH requirements if researchers want to access US government funds.

This means that the Committee must include persons with expertise in recombinant DNA and research involving human and animal subjects, botanical matters and environmental safety.

Wits also includes experts in radiation safety, chemistry, health and safety, and a range of molecular bioscientists. At least two members are required to be external to the University. The University is also required to renew its registration with the NIH annually and to keep it updated on changes to the membership.

The Committee meets to consider projects or to study trials considered to have potentially
significant biosafety risks, or that require Committee input into improving the biosafety processes employed. Once approved, a certificate of clearance valid for five years is provided for the project, but with an annual review that requires a statement that no aspects pertaining to biosafety have changed from the original application. The Committee should be informed of any changes as they occur, via the Research Office.

Heads of laboratories are encouraged to submit an overarching application that outlines biosafety procedures of the laboratory in the context of the broader projects that are being conducted (as these procedures are usually the same for a particular laboratory), rather than multiple small project applications that all utilise exactly the same biosafety procedures. This will devolve the responsibility to the laboratory heads to ensure that the biosafety aspects of all student projects, or other projects, meet the expected requirements. Where funders such as the NIH and other funding agencies require approval for the particular study or trial, these are to be submitted as individual projects.

As such, the Animal Ethics Screening Committee (AESC) certifies all animal-related research and teaching performed by staff and students of Wits and their collaborators. The AESC operates under the guidance of the Animal Ethics Control Committee (AECC) which formulates policy and ratifies certain decisions made by the AESC. Thus, the two committees are mindful of the ethical implications of using animals for research.

The AESC and AECC, which reside under the portfolio of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, subscribe to and follow the principles and practices set out by the South African National Standards for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (SANS 10386:2008). The purpose of the AESC and AECC is to ensure that the refinement of techniques limits suffering of study animals and that as few animals as possible are used, without compromising the scientific relevance and validity of the research. The three R guiding principle (reduction, refinement, replacement) is used at all times. Where there may be some pain, suffering or distress, the AECC and AESC consider whether the benefits to society outweigh the suffering of animals before deciding on whether these studies will be approved.

The AESC consists of a wide variety of experienced scientists, veterinarians and clinicians, as well as animal welfare representatives from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and provincial nature conservation bodies. Thus, the Committee includes individuals with expertise related to the design of scientific studies, veterinary care, and the welfare and conservation of animals. In addition, expertise exists for decisions regarding the societal importance of scientific studies. The AECC has a similar membership profile, but additionally, has impartial representation and representation of experts in bioethics and law.

The AESC meets on a monthly basis and considers new applications that are submitted according to an extensive formal application form, applications for modification or extension of protocols, information received from investigators clarifying outstanding issues that the Committee has requested, unexpected animal mortality and morbidity, and any issues related to animal experimentation or teaching. Animal experimentation or teaching may not commence before approval of applications, and approval is not given retrospectively.

The University of the Witwatersrand accepts that animal-based research and teaching is fundamental to the life and medical sciences, but that the institution has a responsibility to ensure that these activities are conducted according to the highest possible ethical standards.