ETHICS COMMITTEES
The Human Research Ethics Committee (Medical) (HREC (Medical)) was established in October 1966 and is the oldest such committee in the southern hemisphere, and one of the oldest in existence.

2013 was a busy year; the full Committee reviewed 769 general research applications submitted through the Wits Research Office plus 84 clinical trials through the Ethics Secretariat of the Wits Health Consortium. In addition, 59 waivers from the need for Committee approval were issued by the chair and four co-chairs. Either an ethics clearance or a waiver is required by funding bodies, by journals before a biomedical manuscript may be accepted for publication, and by faculty administration on submission of a research report, dissertation or thesis. The research projects that qualify for a waiver are those not involving human participants such as reviews of information in the public domain and the use of commercial materials such as cell lines. In contrast, in 2003, a total of 541 applications were reviewed by the full Committee, so there has been a 58% increase over the past decade; a recent contribution to the increase is that trainee clinical specialists are now required to complete a MMed or MDent research report before they may register with the Health Professions Council of South Africa as specialists in medicine or dentistry. The heavy workload necessitated the appointment of a second administrator in the Research Office from 2013.

An important development in 2013 was the formation of a Biobanks Ethics Committee within the HREC (Medical). Below are two brief extracts from the principles and policy document which has received considerable national and international interest:

“Biobanks are repositories where organised collections of human biological materials (HBMs) and associated data from large numbers of individuals are collected, stored and distributed for the purpose of health research.”

“The HREC (Medical) has established the Biobanks Ethics Committee (BEC) to:

1. Develop principles, policy and guidelines for the review and approval of applications for the establishment of biobanks;
2. Review all applications for the establishment of biobanks and to make recommendations to the HREC; and
3. Review all research using tissue samples and/or associated data from approved biobanks and make recommendations to the HREC.”

Finally, it is anticipated that the number of applications from trainee clinical specialists will continue to rise, possibly for a year or two, before stability is reached.
In the social sciences and humanities, interviews, questionnaires and participant observation are well-established methodologies to make sense of people's behaviours and larger social processes. Over the last few years, however, there has been increased interest in involving human participants in a variety of other disciplines. Engineering is just one example.

As a result, it is imperative to ensure 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 means 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 meets monthly under the chairpersonship of Professor Tommaso Milani, a scholar in the field of gender and sexuality.

The Committee consists of 26 members from a range of disciplines; three members of the Committee are laypeople from outside the University.

At the moment, the Committee is in the process of being registered and accredited with the National Health Research Council.

All in all, the Committee encompasses a collective corpus of expertise which few can match in this relatively young field in South Africa.
The University of the Witwatersrand Institutional Biosafety Committee (IBC) was established over 10 years ago to review and approve University-based research involving the use of biohazardous materials and procedures, which may present biosafety risks to both the investigator and the community in general. This includes research that involves handling biological specimens such as blood/urine/sputum/faecal samples, natural or laboratory-modified organisms such as viruses, bacteria and other cell types, and activities aimed at generating, manipulating and using nucleic acid sequences (recombinant DNA technology) for basic and applied research, for which purpose the IBC is guided by the prescriptions of the United States National Institutes of Health (NIH). Applications to the NIH for funding cannot be considered without the approval of a formally constituted institutional biosafety committee. In this regard, the Wits IBC is formally recognised by the NIH and renews its registration with the NIH annually.

The IBC meets three to four times per annum to consider the biosafety aspects employed in University laboratories and institutes. The heads/directors of laboratories are encouraged to submit applications that describe the general procedures and materials used in their facilities, as opposed to submissions for individual projects, across which experimental approaches are usually shared. In the case where IBC approval is required for funding specific projects, then the IBC will receive and review individual project proposals. Where necessary, the IBC advises on areas of concern that require clarification or greater alignment with official University Biosafety Guidelines, which are published on the Research Office website (http://www.wits.ac.za/academic/research/applications.htm). Once the IBC is satisfied that these concerns have been addressed satisfactorily, the applicant is issued with a clearance certificate that is valid for five years. However, holders of IBC approval certificates are required to submit annual statements declaring that no aspects related to biosafety have changed from the original application.

Over the last year the IBC has seen some significant changes in membership. We are very pleased to welcome five new Committee members (two external, three internal): Dr Antonel Olckers, DNAbiotec (Pty) Ltd; Dr Raymond Hewer, MINTEK; Professor Graham Alexander, School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences; Dr Clare Cutland, Respiratory and Meningal Pathogens Research Unit; and Dr Natalie Whalley, School of Pathology. As such, the IBC now comprises members with a diverse array of expertise in molecular bioscience, clinical research, genetics, radiation safety and plant and animal sciences, and these individuals bring valuable and much needed expertise to facilitate the efficient and accurate execution of IBC responsibilities.
The Animal Ethics Screening Committee (AESC) and the Animal Ethics Control Committee (AECC) are responsible for the control of all animal-based research that is conducted by the staff and students of the University.

The AESC scrutinises, amends and certifies all experimental protocols that relate to animal research and teaching, while the AECC formulates policy and ratifies certain decisions made by the AESC. The AECC resides under the portfolio of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, and both Committees strictly 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).

In addition, policies and procedures are regularly updated to conform to international trends. Although the University accepts that animal-based research and teaching is fundamental to the life and medical sciences, it is mindful of the importance of minimising animal suffering, while not compromising scientific relevance and validity of the research. To this end, it strives to apply the three-R guiding principle (reduction, refinement, replacement) at all times.

The AESC consists of a wide range 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, 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 the impartial representation of experts in bio-ethics and law. The AECC 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 requested by the Committee, and unexpected animal mortality and morbidity are also considered.

During 2013, the AESC evaluated 58 applications and approved 55 of these, most with conditions that further refined the protocols. In addition to this, it also certified 82 modifications and/or extensions to existing protocols. Members of the AESC and AECC were active in an initiative to upgrade the Central Animal Services throughout 2013, and were also involved with an initiative to migrate applications for animal ethics clearance to a digital platform.