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COMMUNIQUE: NO 1

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH STUDIES BEING UNDERTAKEN
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

23 March 2020

Dear Staff and Students

In light of the current precautionary measures that are being implemented, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we would like to provide some suggestions of how to keep your participants and yourself safe when undertaking your research study, during these uncertain times. The following guidelines are not meant to be prescriptive, but following a meeting of all the research directors on Wednesday 18 March 2020, it was decided that there should be a communication sent out to provide some guidance with regard to active research studies being undertaken during this time, in order to ease any worries or concerns that researchers and students may have in relation to the progress of their research studies.

1. There is currently no directive from either the University or the Government, indicating that research should be halted, but in light of the rapidly developing situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, we do suggest, that as far as possible, research activities that expose participants, researchers and research team members (such as fieldworkers) to possible risk of infection, should be halted during this period.
2. It is strongly suggested that, as far as possible, the following specific research activities should be halted:
 - a. Research activities which require close contact with a participant e.g. anthropometric measures or drawing blood etc.
 - b. Research activities that require face-to face interaction for an extended period of time e.g. semi-structured interviews etc.
 - c. Research activities that require direct interaction between more than three individuals e.g. focus group discussions.
3. It is further recommended that, as far as possible, research studies that are being undertaken in the following settings should be halted:
 - a. Settings where there is a great potential for being infected e.g. hospitals, primary health care clinics, governmental facilities, community centres etc.
 - b. Settings where participants are at increased susceptibility to the COVID-19 virus e.g. frail care facilities, clinics for those infected with tuberculosis or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) etc.
 - c. Settings where social distancing protocols cannot be instituted e.g. people's homes or high volume areas such as malls and shopping centres.

4. If it is not possible to completely halt all research activities in the aforementioned situations, then it is recommended that the researcher submit a serious incident report to the Executive and Serious Adverse Event (SAE) committee of the appropriate research ethics committee (as per the process indicated in SOP 1.3 (2.2.4_SOP_Ethics_1.3) on the Health Sciences Ethics Office webpage (<http://health-sciences.nwu.ac.za/healthethics/sops>)), indicating your suggested way of dealing with the infection risk within your research study. When submitting the serious incident report, it should be clear what preventative measures will be implemented to protect the participants, the researchers and the research team members (such as the field workers). Based on the recommendations of the Executive and SAE committee of the appropriate REC, you can then proceed with any amendments or changes that need to be made within your research study.
5. In general, research studies being undertaken in a laboratory setting can proceed, as long as the appropriate infection control protocols are implemented, such as:
 - a. Hand washing before entering and after leaving the laboratory
 - b. Sanitizing of work benches
 - c. Wearing of personal protection equipment (PPE) etc.
 - d. Researchers should, however, be aware of the potential for overcrowding in laboratories and it may be prudent to institute a rota for the people working in the laboratory.
6. When working with animals in a research study, the maintenance and monitoring of the animals should remain a priority and there should be a clear management plan instituted in the facilities where the animals are being kept, to ensure that the animals do not have to be euthanized. Again, research studies in these contexts can proceed, although it is suggested that extra precautions are taken when interacting with the animals, due to the zoonotic nature of COVID-19 virus i.e. its ability to be infect both humans and animals.
7. In general, students should not be forced or coerced to continue working on their research study, if they have indicated that they would prefer to self-isolate. As far as possible, supervisors should respect this request and reasonably institute any support needed to assist the student to do so.
8. These recommendations are by no means exhaustive but could potentially assist in protecting the research participants, the researcher and members of their research team (such as fieldworkers). If you have any specific queries regarding research being undertaken during this time, then you are welcome to contact the Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support at 018 299 2092 or the Office of the Deputy Dean: Research and Innovation at 018 299 4015.

Issued by: The Head of the Ethics Office, Chairpersons of NWU-HREC and NWU-AnimCareREC and research ethics advisor