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COMMUNIQUE: NO 6

**RESTRICTED CONTINUATION OF RESEARCH DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: DIFFERENTIATED REQUIREMENTS**

2 July 2020

Dear Researchers, staff and students

We hope that this mail finds you and your families safe and healthy. As was indicated in Communique 5, the *continuation of research* during the COVID-19 pandemic has to be *well-managed* and has to be undertaken in a *careful and measured* manner, based on the types of research being undertaken, to ensure the protection of the *participants*, the *researchers* and the *university* as a whole.

In order to manage research restrictions based on the a) governmental alert level regulations and/or b) NWU research directives issued by either the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC): Research and Innovation or c) directives by Faculty based Deputy Deans: Research and Innovation, a system has been instituted within the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support to support the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (**NWU-HREC**) and the North-West University Animal Care, Safety and Health Research Ethics Committee (**NWU-AnimCareREC**). This system has been setup based on discussions undertaken during the most recent NWU-HREC and NWU-AnimCareREC meetings.

Based on these discussions, it was decided that:

- a. For existing studies that were *put on hold* due to a specific alert level, **permission to resume** has to first be obtained from the FHS Ethics Office to ensure that COVID-19 research risk assessment and management processes have been integrated into the project before it is allowed to resume (which will be handled in an expedited manner).
- b. It would in future be clearly indicated in writing i.e. in the approval letter, by the aforementioned research ethics committees (RECs), whether a research study could *begin in its present format* (if COVID-19 research risk assessment and management processes were integrated into the planning).
- c. It would be clearly indicated in writing i.e. in the request for changes during the approval process, what would have to be done before the research study could proceed, if COVID-19 research risk assessment and management processes were not included.
- d. It would be clearly indicated in writing, during the passive monitoring process, i.e. in the monitoring feedback letter by the aforementioned RECs, whether a research study could resume or if the study should remain *on hold*, due to a specific alert level. In the latter case,

permission to resume has to first be obtained from the FHS's Ethics Office to ensure that COVID-19 research risk assessment and management processes have been integrated into the study, before the study can resumed.

This will be indicated to the researcher, either:

- a. In a special communique (this communique).
- b. During the research ethics application phase of a study.
- c. During the passive monitoring process.

The decision of which studies **will** be allowed to proceed, and which studies **will not** be allowed to proceed, will be based on the *types of studies permitted during a specific alert level's regulations and the NWU directives for the specific level* specified by either the DVC: Research and Innovation or the Deputy Dean: Research and Innovation as indicated in the attached document entitled "**Alert levels and Research**".

Research will be managed based on the alert level we find ourselves in, as well as with a specific understanding that the alert level could change at any time. It is the responsibility of each researcher to be aware of the alert level we find ourselves in, as a country and to adhere to all regulations and guidelines of the specified alert level. Should an alert level revert back to a higher alert level, the researcher should adjust to the indicated implications discussed in the attached document. Researchers should not transgress on any governmental regulations or NWU directives.

At present we are functioning under **alert level 3 regulations** and as such, only the following mentioned types of studies are allowed to continue:

- a. *All laboratory work (including work with animals or previously collected human samples), where the appropriate safety measures have been implemented according to the North-West University COVID-19 Occupational Health and Safety Standard Operating Procedure.*
- b. *Studies that undertake data gathering with human participants via email, telephone or an online platform.*
- c. *Studies that collect data via online questionnaires or surveys.*
- d. *Studies that only make use of previously-collected data, where there is no contact with human participants.*

The followings types of studies are however, placed **on hold** (even if the study has been previously approved), until the **appropriate alert level** at which the study can proceed is reached:

- a. *Any research that requires face-to-face interaction with human participants in close proximity e.g. face-to-face interviews, focus groups, human sample collection, etc.*
- b. *Any research that is undertaken in homes, the community, or restricted government facilities e.g. schools, prisons, facilities for the aged etc.*

Researchers undertaking these types of previously approved studies will have to **apply to the appropriate REC to resume the study** using the attached *template* to request *continuation* of the research study, once the appropriate alert level is reached. This will further require a researcher to first *amend a study to include a COVID-19 research risk assessment and management strategy*.

Once the alert level is appropriate for a study to proceed, the researcher should:

- a. Send the completed template with the required amendments (as made as specified under 8.4 in the SOP for the research ethics approval application process (2.2.4_SOP_Ethics_1.4)) to either Ethics-HRECApply@nwu.ac.za (for studies reviewed by the NWU-HREC) or to NWU-AnimCare@nwu.ac.za (for studies reviewed by the NWU-AnimCareREC).

- b. Name the email, to which you attach the document that you send, with a specific subject line indicating that it is a request to resume a research study e.g. "Request to resume research (COVID-19): NWU-XXXXX-XX-XX".
- c. Contact the Head of the Ethics Office, Prof Wayne Towers at [072 149 2960](tel:0721492960) or wayne.towers@nwu.ac.za and the Chairperson, Prof Petra Bester at [082 298 3567](tel:0822983567) or petra.bester@nwu.ac.za (for research involving human participants) or Prof Tiaan Brink at [082 920 9698](tel:0829209698) or tiaan.brink@nwu.ac.za (for research involving animals), at least before you plan to submit the application for review, so that we can timeously appoint appropriate reviewers and proactively manage the process of the review of your amendment.

The review of this request will be handled via the *expedited process*. If successful, the researcher will receive a letter indicating that the amendments were approved and the study can proceed. Please note that if it is determined that the researcher has proceeded with the research, without first amending a study and obtaining the appropriate permission, they will be seen to have either violated good research practice or been non-compliant and the necessary steps will be taken. Please inform us at your earliest convenience should you have any queries. We wish you all great strength and peace in the weeks and months to come.

Note: Please read this communique with the attached document "**Implications of alert levels for researchers and postgraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic**" (Prof Minrie Greeff, 21 May 2020).

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