

**WHO Expert Advisory Committee on Developing Global Standards
for Governance and Oversight of Human Genome Editing**

Report of the sixth meeting

25–26 March 2021



WHO Expert Advisory Committee on Developing Global Standards for Governance and Oversight of Human Genome Editing: report of the sixth meeting, 25-26 March 2021

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1. Background

In December 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) established a global, multidisciplinary expert advisory committee to examine the scientific, ethical, social and legal challenges associated with human genome editing (both somatic and germline). The Expert Advisory Committee on Developing Global Standards for Governance and Oversight of Human Genome Editing includes members from Africa, the Americas, South-East Asia, Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Pacific.¹

The Committee was tasked with advising and making recommendations on appropriate institutional, national, regional and global governance mechanisms for human genome editing. Its remit did not include a review of matters to do with safety and efficacy. This charge was given to the International Commission on the Clinical Use of Human Germline Genome Editing.² During the course of its work, the Committee reviewed the current literature on human genome editing research and its applications, considered existing proposals for governance and relevant ongoing initiatives, and solicited information about societal attitudes towards the different uses of this technology.

The Committee consulted widely with individuals and representatives of organizations, including relevant United Nations and other international agencies, academies of science and medicine and national or professional bodies, patient groups and civil society organizations. These consultations explored how best to promote transparent and trustworthy policies and practices and ensure appropriate assessments of relevant work prior to it being undertaken.

2. Past work

The Committee held its first meeting from 18 to 19 March 2019. The first meeting included a review of the current state of relevant science and technology and briefings on existing initiatives and reports relevant to its work. Participants also began to identify and discuss specific issues, mechanisms and stakeholders that could comprise, or contribute to the development of, a governance framework. The Committee also considered how these elements may differ at international, regional, national or local level. The group made three recommendations to the Director-General: (a) to develop a registry to provide a more structured mechanism for collecting and curating details of planned and ongoing relevant research and development; (b) that “it would be irresponsible at this time for anyone to

¹ Expert Advisory Committee on Developing Global Standards for Governance and Oversight of Human Genome Editing: <https://www.who.int/groups/expert-advisory-committee-on-developing-global-standards-for-governance-and-oversight-of-human-genome-editing/about>.

² National Academy of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences, and the Royal Society. Heritable human genome editing. Washington (DC): National Academies Press; 2020. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25665>.

proceed with clinical applications of human germline genome editing”, and that the Director-General should communicate this view to relevant regulatory bodies around the world; and (c) to enhance WHO’s capacity to share information with, and collect information from, both technical and lay audiences. Each of these recommendations was aligned with one of the guiding principles adopted by the Committee: (a) transparency; (b) the responsible stewardship of science; and (c) inclusivity. A report of the meeting is available online.³

In a statement issued on 26 July 2019, the Director-General formally and publicly endorsed the Committee’s recommendation that it would be irresponsible for anyone to proceed with clinical applications of human germline genome editing.⁴ He stated that regulatory authorities in all countries should not allow any further work in this area until its implications had been properly considered. WHO has begun communicating this opinion to its regional and country offices.

The Committee held its second meeting from 26 to 28 August 2019. The second meeting focused on hearing additional views and insights relevant to the Committee’s work. The meeting included updates on relevant activities in different countries and from national, regional, and international organizations, as well as briefings by external experts on aspects of its mandate. The Committee’s working groups reviewed progress on establishing a registry of relevant research and development and responsible scientific stewardship. During closed sessions on the final day of the meeting, the Committee discussed a range of scenarios that could be used to help develop and test the governance framework, as well as opportunities for education, engagement and empowerment. The meeting outcomes included confirming the scope of the Committee’s work; providing clearer rationale for including somatic human genome editing in the committee’s mandate and in the online registry; revising and updating the guiding principles; establishing a phased approach to the development of the Registry; the creation of a working group on education, engagement and empowerment; plans for two rounds of online consultation to further expand opportunities for input into the Committee’s work; and initial reflections on content for a governance framework. A report of the meeting is available online.⁵

The first online consultation ran from 15 January 2020 to 7 February 2020. The spread of COVID-19 increased significantly during this time, making the dissemination of the survey challenging. The Committee anticipated wider circulation than proved possible at the time.

The survey included 12 questions divided into four parts: (a) questions on who was providing a response; (b) questions on the general approach taken by the Committee; (c) questions on the draft governance framework being developed by the Committee; and (d) final comments – an open question for respondents to provide additional input for the Committee. Major themes appearing in the responses included concern over appropriate outreach to a wide

³ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/341017/WHO-SCI-RFH-2019.01-eng.pdf>.

⁴ <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/26-07-2019-statement-on-governance-and-oversight-of-human-genome-editing>.

⁵ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/341018/WHO-SCI-RFH-2019.02-eng.pdf>.

audience to ensure consideration of social implications beyond technical or medical considerations; suggestions about integrating views of industry, bioethicists and governments; recognition of cross-border challenges to harmonization or coordination of policies; and the importance of ongoing consultation and transparency. Feedback was provided on a draft of the governance framework being developed by the Committee. Very few respondents identified elements in the framework they found to be unacceptable. Many comments included suggestions for improving the framework, such as additions or alterations to the proposed framework. A report of the consultation is available online.⁶

The Committee held its third meeting from 25 to 26 February 2020. The meeting focused on hearing the views and insights of those often excluded from international science policy processes. The meeting included contributions by African research organizations, community groups from Africa, and African bioethicists, as well as first-hand testimony from those affected by conditions that have been connected to human genome editing. The meeting was also briefed on satellite meetings supported by Committee members in other parts of the world. During closed working sessions, the Committee heard an initial overview of responses to its first online consultation; considered updates and reports from its working groups; continued to develop its governance framework; and developed plans for a second online consultation, taking into account lessons learned from its earlier consultation. The meeting outcome focused on revising and restructuring the governance framework in light of feedback. The Committee also considered how it might capture, in its future work, systemic issues connected to public health and sustainable development agendas that are likely to have a notable impact on the future development of human genome editing. A report of the meeting is available online.⁷

The second online consultation ran from 14 July 2020 to 19 August 2020. The survey included 12 questions divided into four parts: (a) questions on who was providing a response; (b) questions on the general approach to developing a governance framework; (c) questions on specific parts of the draft governance framework; and (d) final comments – an open question for respondents to provide additional input for the Committee. Responses received were largely positive, with wide support for the approach taken by the Committee, its efforts to be inclusive, differentiation between somatic and germline human genome editing, and improvements in the draft since the first online consultation. Some negative responses were received, with concerns being raised over the length of the framework and possible

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