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By Ben Upton in Budapest

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World science forum: Who makes the rules?

As research goes global, everyone wants a hand in writing its ethical codes

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As science becomes increasingly international, the contrasts in nations' research cultures become more obvious.

While laws in Europe prevent human genome editing, researchers in China and Russia have amassed headlines, and approbation, for gene-editing experiments. Similarly, while stem cell work in the United States has been shaped at the national level, researchers in Japan tend to self-police.

As the ninth World Science Forum (WSF) ended on 23 November in Budapest, the world's leading researcher organisations published a declaration calling for the "harmonisation and enforcement of standards of conduct" for research worldwide.

But there are questions over whether standards can and should be matched across borders and disciplines, and whether rules are best handed down from global bodies or left up to researchers themselves.

Margaret Hamburg (pictured), co-chair of the World Health Organization advisory panel on human genome editing, says there will never be "one prescriptive law" governing scientific ethics worldwide. She points to the Declaration of Helsinki, which outlines how human experiments should be approached. This has informed local laws, but via a limited top-down approach that guides, rather than stipulates, she says.

"The world is a messy place and there is no one clear decision maker, and no one clear model," she says.

Besides pushing regions and disciplines to adopt global rules, the WSF's closing declaration calls for "self-regulatory processes" that allow researchers to police adherence to these strictures.

Institutions are training academic support staff to help in investigations, but some researchers question where the burden of checking and enforcing the growing number of guidelines and laws should fall.

Kjersti Lohne, a criminologist at the University of Oslo, warned the conference that European researchers are facing an "increasing bureaucratisation" of ethics.

She said questions of right and wrong were increasingly answered by an "ever-growing" caucus of "university administrators, research managers and lawyers".

In Norway that shift has been hastened by an ethics law that Lohne said was encouraging academics to tick boxes rather than question the ethics of a matter.

Lohne says that to change research culture, ethics training needs to be mainstream, and include project leaders and university directors, rather than just postdoctoral students. Other delegates said that to work ethically, academics must view research through the eyes of wider society.

The five-day conference began with Dutch philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek contrasting "negative" freedom from constraint with the "positive" freedom to serve society.

Advocating systems based on the latter, he said researchers should "not see ethics as a border guard" but as rules that "formulate the convictions for science and society to flourish".

If citizens are to trust academia, researchers must be willing to be constrained—to "learn to trust science to our society", says Verbeek.

But such a leap will take more than declarations.

This article also appeared in Research Europe

Image: Tamás Szigeti, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

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