Abstract

An ethical analysis was performed during the development of a research project titled Culture, nourishment and malaria in the Kuna aboriginals of Urabá, Colombia. This project had 2 objectives; (1) to investigate the prevalence of malaria and its relationship with hypovitaminosis A and nutritional status, and (2) to understand the communitys conceptions and practices towards malaria. The current paper summarizes reflections concerning the application of ethical principles and moral values during the course of the malaria research project. Two intercultural relationships were clearly defined: the culture of the Tule (Kuna) Indians, with a traditional medical system, and the culture of the research group, focused on the biomedical model. The rationale and the discussion proposed during the writing of the project proposal was presented as well as the dilemmas that developed during the project within the communities. These problems required rapid decision-making in situations for which the scientists had not been adequately prepared. A need was indicated for application of ethical principles to permeate the analysis throughout the research process in a horizontal manner, such that the human dignity of the participants and the ethnicity of the community are preserved above the purposes of the project. In the research process, mediation between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of consequences must take precedence, with both outcomes tied to an informed consent in place during the process. The establishment of national and local research ethics committees was indicated as necessary to preserve the lifestyle and culture of the ethnic groups. These values were seen as endangered given the trading pressures and health policies in a globalized world.

Keywords

Ethnic group, ethic research, traditional medicine, biomedical research, research, ethics committees, informed consent.