The Guidelines for Research Ethics on Human Remains were drawn up by the National Committee for Research Ethics on Human Remains in accordance with the mandate given by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). The guidelines were adopted in 2013 after a national consultation in the autumn of 2012, and this English edition was made available in July 2016.

The National Committee for Research Ethics on Human Remains is a subcommittee under NESH, which is part of the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, an independent administrative agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. It is an impartial advisory body providing guidance and advice on research ethics, and the guidelines are important tools for promoting good scientific practice in the Norwegian research system.
SCOPE OF THE GUIDELINES

The overarching framework for these guidelines is NESH’s *Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology.*

In the present guidelines, «human remains» are understood to mean intact skeletons, parts of skeletons, remains after cremations, and other human biological material that is retained by museums and collections, or which emerges as a result of archaeological and other investigations. A rule of thumb for defining the intended scope of the guidelines is that in practice they will largely concern human remains that are more than about 60 years old.

The word «research» is to be given a broad interpretation in these guidelines, so that research also includes teaching, communication and exhibits relating to research.

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1 A printed version of NESH’s *Guidelines on Research Ethics for the Social sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology* is available on request to the National Committees on Research Ethics. Both NESH’s Guidelines and the *Guidelines for Research Ethics on Human Remains* are also available at http://www.etikkom.no.
GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH ETHICS ON HUMAN REMAINS

1. Respect for the deceased
Irrespective of the age of the remains and how fragmentary they are, research on human remains requires respect for the person of whom the remains were a part. In practice, this means that the material must be treated with discretion and dignity. When it comes to the treatment of the remains, it is also appropriate, where possible, to consider what one would assume to be the wishes of the person in question, particularly in cases where the remains are relatively recent.

2. The same consideration irrespective of origin
It is important to treat remains from all countries and areas with the same respect. Different peoples and cultures have different traditions, also when it comes to attitudes toward human remains. It is important to respect the cultural context or contexts in question. Some cultures have more stringent, or different requirements from those that are typical of the Norwegian majority society today. It is natural, then, to take account of these differences.

3. Respect for descendants
When the identity of the deceased is known, it is important to communicate with their descendants. The closer the remains are to present day descendants in relationship or time, the more important it may be to contact the descendants for information and dialogue before any research commences. The responsibility to take account of descendants tends to lessen with the age of the remains, but this is by no means automatically the case.

4. Respect for other groups
In various ways, a person represents a number of groups in addition to their own family. These forms of representativeness do not cease when a person dies, but may remain a central part of the identity of the remains of a person. It is the researcher’s responsibility to learn about and show due consideration for the groups the remains represent. These groups may be of an ethnic, religious or national nature.

Throughout the course of history, some groups have been oppressed, humiliated or in some other manner badly treated by the majority society or national authority. These groups may have reasons for being particularly sensitive to research which in one way or another represents a risk of this history being continued or repeated. Part of this history is often that research, too, has played a discriminatory role. Research on remains of members of these groups demands insight into history, extreme caution and willingness to communicate and hold a dialogue.

In some cases, consideration for these groups dictates that a project should not be carried out. On the other hand, a negative history does not necessarily mean that research should not be conducted on remains in such situations. Knowledge about historically vulnerable groups is important and valuable. In some cases, the solution may be to modify the original project before carrying it out.

5. Respect for the rarity of the material
The respect due to the research material itself also depends on its rarity or uniqueness. For example, very old age often also implies rarity. Research that entails the destruction of rare or unique research material should therefore only take place after a thorough overall evaluation, and should be very well-founded. We must assume that new generations of researchers will have new questions to which they want answers, and different methods from those we have today. In this sense, then, respect for the material will also include respect for research other than that involved in one’s own project.

For the same reason, it should be considered prior to initiating research excavations whether material already available in collections can serve the same research purposes as the remains being considered for excavation.

6. Assessment of the feasibility and consequences of the research project
An ethical evaluation of a research project includes assessing the quality of the project and how likely it is that the project, as described, will result in the intended gain in terms of knowledge. An evaluation of the quality of the project and anticipated knowledge acquired will be particularly important if a project implies destruction of rare material or has other possible undesirable consequences.
The following aspects of a research project are among those that affect whether the anticipated knowledge gains can actually be achieved: (1) The method chosen is not always the most appropriate. (2) The researcher is lacking sufficient relevant expertise to carry out the excavation/retrieval, sampling or analysis. (3) The research project is too vague or too ambitious in relation to the funding available, or the funding is too uncertain, to be able to yield the intended results. (4) Central research questions which are heavily dependent on the material in question in order to be answered, are not being addressed. (5) The project is not being adequately coordinated with other ongoing or planned projects.

There are often several reasons for carrying out research, and also a number of consequences that the researchers neither sought nor foresaw. As a rule some of these consequences are desirable, but others may be considered problematic or undesirable. Researchers are responsible for weighing up the various possible or probable consequences of every project.

7. Respect for other researchers

Empirical research normally implies a requirement of the possibility of repeating experiments or verifying processes. This entails taking account of the need of other researchers to verify and have an opportunity to use the same material to research other questions and issues. This is an argument against destroying unique material. It is also an argument against monopolising research material, but instead for allowing other researchers access to the material one is conducting research on oneself. Monopolising of research objects is in conflict with both the general ideal of research and with research as a public, joint investment.

8. Taking into consideration the context and provenance of a discovery

It is important that researchers know the circumstances surrounding the material, and the site of the discovery. In some cases, research on material of uncertain provenance implies participating in illegal or unethical activities, because the material has been part of an illegal economy, or because it has been acquired in a manner that involved encroachment on the rights of individuals or groups. Unknown or uncertain provenance will lower the quality of the project, and in some cases make the results worthless. Researchers cannot disclaim responsibility for this aspect of their project.

9. The importance of complying with existing laws and rules and obtaining authorisations

These guidelines are an aid to ethical reflection for researchers, and are by no means intended to replace, interpret or supplement applicable legislation and rules.

There are formal requirements in both Norwegian and foreign legislation and governance regulating the excavation/retrieval, handling, sampling and analysis of material. This system helps to ensure that research on and administration of material proceeds in an acceptable manner. It is therefore very important that researchers familiarise themselves with and comply with applicable laws and regulations.\(^2\)

It must be possible to submit documentation that authorisation has been obtained to carry out a project when such authorisation is required.

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