Are research ethics boards (REBs) required to resume meeting in person after the end of the publicly declared emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The TCPS 2 states that REBs "shall normally meet face to face to review proposed research that is not assigned to delegated review" (Article 6.10). In some specific circumstances, REBs may meet by teleconference or videoconference, but only when meeting in person is not possible, in exceptional cases, and when necessary in the context of publicly declared emergencies (Articles 6.10 and 6.22). Therefore, based on the current TCPS 2 guidance, REBs should resume meeting in person after the end of a publicly declared emergency. However, building on their experience with meeting virtually for many months, some REBs have expressed an interest in continuing to meet virtually after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, REBs have continued to deliver on their mandate efficiently and effectively while operating virtually utilizing various communication platforms. The use of these virtual communication platforms during the pandemic has proven beneficial. They supported the continuity of REB operations in a timely manner, enabled the inclusion of diverse participation, representation, and accessibility for REB members (for example those from remote or rural communities, or with physical disabilities or care giving responsibilities), and facilitated consultation with *ad hoc* advisors when special expertise was needed. Moreover, virtual communication platforms have also proven to be useful when other exceptional circumstances affect the ability of REBs to meet in person due to environmental emergencies, for example.

The Panel on Research Ethics acknowledges the potential benefits of maintaining REB meetings virtually after the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the premise behind the requirement for in person REB meetings for research requiring full board review rests on the participation and deliberation of REB members in real-time (i.e., synchronously). The use of communication platforms has proven to meet this purpose and support the quality of the REB review process. On this basis, it would be reasonable for REBs to have the option to meet in person, virtually, or to adopt a hybrid model (both virtual and in person), to review the ethical acceptability of research requiring full board review after the end of the publicly declared emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the support of their institutions, REBs wishing to meet virtually or adopt a hybrid model (combining both virtual and in person) should develop their own procedures that enable them to benefit from such flexibility in their meetings.

Full board REB meetings must always be conducted in real-time (i.e., synchronously). When meeting virtually via communication platforms, the use of videoconferencing is the preferred option to facilitate interaction and dialogue. However, it is also recognized that not all members of the REB might have access to sufficient bandwidth for video participation, and thus teleconferencing may be acceptable under such circumstances. In accordance with institutional support and established policies and procedures, the REB, through its Chair, determines the most appropriate approach to follow in order to facilitate REB member participation. The selected approach should also enable the Chair to manage REB meetings effectively and efficiently, and ensure that the REB operations, activities, and quality of communications are maintained without interruption.

Following the publication of this guidance, the use of communication platforms in the conduct of REB meetings is no longer limited to exceptional circumstances or publicly declared emergencies as outlined in Article 6.10. This new flexibility will require revisions to the TCPS in its next iteration.