Summary

During the period under review, the Committee held 10 meetings and examined 391 non-NHS research applications involving human participants to ensure that ethical standards were met. Research ethics is a growth area with increasing external guidance and regulation. The Committee aims to promote soundly based ethical research.

Composition of the Committee

**Lay Chair:** Professor John Foreman, Emeritus Professor of Immunopharmacology

**Lay Members:**
- Mr Adrian Aldcroft, Senior Executive Editor, Biomed Central
- Lady Gomersall, Media Consultant
- Ms Antonia Hinds, former Commissioning Editor for C4 Education
- Mrs Carol Stratton, former Health Worker and Child Protection Specialist
- Mrs Janella Thow, former Head-Teacher

**UCL Academic Members:**
- Dr Sarah Edwards, UCL/UCLH Comprehensive Biomedical Research Centre
- Professor Michael Heinrich, School of Pharmacy
- Dr George Letsas, Faculty of Laws
- Ms Kathryn Lord, Mental Health Sciences Unit
- Professor Raymond MacAllister (Vice-Chair), Research Dept. of Metabolism and Experimental Therapeutics
- Professor David Taylor (Vice-Chair), School of Pharmacy

**Ethics Co-ordinator:** Ms Helen Dougal, UCL Graduate School

The Work of the Committee

Applications to the Committee have continued to show a steady increase since the Committee’s inception in January 2003. This is a good sign as it reflects the vigour of research at UCL and an increasing awareness of ethical issues.

391 applications were submitted in the period July 2012-July 2013 from the following Faculties: Brain Sciences (142), Population Health Sciences (92), Social and Historical Sciences (59), Medical Sciences (42), Engineering Sciences (31), Laws (0), Life Sciences (5), Built Environment (10) and Arts and Humanities (4), Mathematical and Physical Sciences (4) and non-academic departments (2).

Of these applications, 3 were withdrawn, 1 was terminated and the remaining 387 applications were approved: 185 by full Committee review, 206 by Chair’s Action. The research proposals approved by the Chair involved no more than minimal risk and the participants were not children or other vulnerable groups. On average a decision was reached on each application within 20 days of the submission deadline and in a few days by Chair’s Action.

The link below provides access to a list of all the projects (a) approved; (b) withdrawn; and (c) approved and now completed in this period: [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/gs/appendix-ethics-ann-report-2012-13.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/gs/appendix-ethics-ann-report-2012-13.pdf)

No proposals were rejected but frequent changes were required to the procedures for informed consent and occasionally to the research protocol itself. Some researchers have difficulty in explaining in simple, lucid prose what they want to do and why. Through the good offices of the Graduate School difficulties are resolved in a constructive and helpful manner. It is important to underline that the guiding principle of the Committee is to promote and create an ethically sound research culture at UCL and not to place obstacles or delays in the way of researchers.

Recent Developments

1. ‘Research Ethics at UCL’ pamphlet ([http://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/forms/leaflet.pdf](http://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/forms/leaflet.pdf)) was updated and distributed to all departments in a bid to increase awareness across UCL of the importance of the ethical review of research by students (undergraduate and graduate) and staff.

2. Monitoring research students engagement with ethics – The Graduate School’s online Research Student Log is a mandatory component of all UCL research degree programmes. A question has been inserted into the Log at the point when the research student registers in order to raise awareness by asking the student whether (s)he has considered the ethical implications of their research. It is not a mandatory question for the student to answer at that stage but at the 3-month mark a warning will appear if they
haven’t responded to the question. If the student states that ethical approval, either clinical or non-clinical is required for their research project, (s)he would need to confirm both on the:

- Upgrade Form and within the Log;
- Thesis Submission Form and within the Log

that ethical approval has been granted by quoting an ethics approval project id number. The student would also be asked to confirm whether the research has deviated significantly from that which was approved by a Research Ethics Committee. If yes, the student would need to confirm whether the Committee reviewing their project had been notified of the changes. It would be mandatory for the paper forms to be signed by the Departmental Graduate Tutor at both stages. If the student states that ethical approval is not required, rendering the research project exempt, the Supervisor would need to state within the student’s log entry that (s)he concurs with the student’s opinion that the research is indeed exempt having been apprised of the Committee’s exemption criteria. This will allow us to monitor research students’ engagement with ethics.

3. Development of an ethics flowchart embedded into the online Research Student Log for students to navigate their way through to help them to ascertain whether their research requires (a) NHS REC approval, (b) UCL Research Ethics Committee approval (c) approval through the Animal House Committee or (d) is exempt from the need to obtain approval. We hope that this development will serve to enhance the extensive information already on the website of the UCL Research Ethics Committee at: www.ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk

4. On-going expansion of portfolio of ethics training provision through the Graduate School’s Skills Development Programme in order to heighten awareness of the founding ethical principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. The results of a recent Graduate School Skills Development Training Survey highlighted the fact that there is a need for additional research ethics training courses in such areas as using the internet for fieldwork, working with difficult people, conducting research in conflict zones.

Conclusion
As Chair, I thank the members of the Committee for the hard work and skill they devote to the promotion of research at UCL.

Professor John Foreman
January 2014