

# Framework for ethical international academic partnerships in family medicine



The Besroure Papers: a series on the state of family medicine in Canada and Brazil

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## Abstract

**Objective** To develop an ethical framework for collaboration in international academic partnerships in family medicine.

**Composition of the committee** A subgroup of the Besroure Centre of the College of Family Physicians of Canada including family medicine and bioethics experts began to collaborate in 2014 to undertake the development of an ethical framework and tools for the establishment of ethically sound international academic partnerships.

**Methods** Following 2 consultative workshops and a wider consultation process with the Besroure Centre global community, the authors developed an ethical framework and tools for approval by the Besroure Centre leadership in November 2017.

**Report** Partnerships are essential to family practice and to the field of international development. The flawed nature of many North-South research partnerships underlines the importance of and need for delineating core principles for ethically sound partnerships, of which 10 have been identified in this process: accountability, cost and efficiencies, excellence, equity, humility, justice, leadership, reciprocity, respect for self-determination, and transparency. Based on these principles, a decision-making framework was created to translate these values into actions and to promote a cohesive and transparent structure for discussions. Fostering fairness, transparency, and consistency in decision making reduces the potential for inequity in a partnership, leading to lasting relationships that endure beyond the scope of a partnership agreement.

## Cadre pour des partenariats universitaires internationaux éthiques en médecine familiale

Les documents Besroure: une série sur l'état de la médecine familiale au Canada et au Brésil

## Résumé

**Objectif** Élaborer un cadre éthique pour la collaboration dans les partenariats universitaires internationaux en médecine familiale.

### Editor's key points

- ▶ Partnerships are essential to family practice and to the field of international development.
- ▶ A common vision and shared values among partners, namely quality, equity, relevance, and cost-effectiveness, can help overcome challenges faced in establishing partnerships.
- ▶ A decision-making framework can assist in translating shared values into actions and ensure fairness, transparency, and consistency in decision making among partners.

### Points de repère du rédacteur

- ▶ Les partenariats sont essentiels à l'exercice de la médecine familiale et au développement international.
- ▶ Une vision commune et des valeurs partagées entre partenaires, à savoir la qualité, l'équité, la pertinence et le rapport coût-efficacité, peuvent aider à surmonter les difficultés liées à l'établissement de partenariats.
- ▶ Un cadre décisionnel peut aider à traduire les valeurs partagées en actions et assurer l'équité, la transparence et l'uniformité du processus décisionnel entre les partenaires.

**Composition du comité** Un sous-groupe du Centre Besroux du Collège des médecins de famille du Canada formé d'experts en médecine familiale et en bioéthique a commencé à collaborer en 2014 pour l'élaboration d'un cadre éthique et d'outils pour l'établissement de partenariats universitaires internationaux solides sur le plan éthique.

**Méthodes** Après deux ateliers consultatifs et un processus de consultation plus large avec la communauté mondiale du Centre Besroux, les auteurs ont élaboré un cadre éthique et des outils pour approbation par la direction du Centre Besroux en novembre 2017.

**Rapport** Les partenariats sont essentiels à l'exercice de la médecine familiale et au développement international. La nature imparfaite de nombreux partenariats de recherche Nord-Sud souligne l'importance et la nécessité de définir des principes fondamentaux pour des partenariats éthiques solides, dont dix ont été identifiés par ce processus : responsabilité, coût et efficacité, excellence, équité, humilité, justice, leadership, réciprocité, respect pour l'autodétermination et transparence. Sur la base de ces principes, un cadre décisionnel a été créé pour traduire ces valeurs en actions et pour promouvoir une structure de discussion cohérente et transparente. Favoriser l'équité, la transparence et l'uniformité dans la prise de décisions réduit le risque d'iniquité dans un partenariat, ce qui mène à des relations durables qui dépassent le cadre d'une entente de partenariat.

From its beginning in 2012, the mission of the Besroux Centre at the College of Family Physicians of Canada has been to foster collaboration and advance family medicine around the world. Its founder, Dr Sadok Besroux, envisioned a centre where the expertise of the College of Family Physicians of Canada and the experience of Canadian family physicians could be leveraged, through collaboration with international partners and global stakeholders, to increase access to people-centred and community-informed high-quality care around the world. It is this way that the centre brings together Canadian and international family medicine experts, academics, communities, patients, and key stakeholders to advance the discipline of family medicine as a pathway to health equity around the world and in respect of the values of the Besroux Centre.

### Composition of the committee

The Besroux Centre has 5 active working groups. These groups centre the collaborative work of the Besroux Centre on the development of tools and strategies for achieving the Besroux strategic directions. Within the Advocacy, Community Engagement and Ethics Working Group, a subgroup has been mandated to develop an ethical framework and tools for the establishment of ethically sound international academic partnerships. The ethical framework presented in this article is the result of the efforts of this working group since 2014.

### Methods

Two workshops were held to develop this ethical framework. The first workshop was held in parallel with the 21st WONCA World Conference of Family Doctors in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in November 2016. A second workshop took place at the pre-conference of the World Summit on Social Accountability in Hammamet, Tunisia, in April 2017. After these 2 workshops, extensive feedback on the framework was sought from the Besroux community. The final ethical framework for the establishment of ethically sound international academic partnerships was approved by the Board of Directors for implementation on November 7, 2017, during the Annual Besroux Forum in Montreal, Que, and is presented below.

### Report

**Why partnerships are essential.** Partnerships are the foundation of family medicine. The Institute of Medicine defines *primary care* as

the provision of integrated, accessible health care services by clinicians who are accountable for addressing a large majority of personal health care needs, developing a sustained partnership with patients, and practicing in the context of family and community.<sup>1</sup>

Given the scope of family medicine, there is no doubt that partnerships are essential.

Partnerships are also essential in a global context where the goal is to ensure healthier communities and more equitable health care systems. The Millennium Development Goals (agreed on in 2000)<sup>2</sup> acknowledge that virtually nothing in the sphere of international development happens without effective partnerships. There are also ethical reasons for partnership. Several scholars have shown that those particularly vulnerable to the choices of others and the outcomes of such choices deserve extra consideration to be measured.<sup>3,4</sup>

There are many challenges in forming partnerships, such as financial constraints, sustaining commitment of the organizations, safety, and risk management. Other challenges are related to a moral shift to "learn to unlearn," including being aware of Western cultural biases.<sup>5</sup> Valuing differences, seeing strength in diversity, acknowledging power differences as well as sharing power, and stating expectations clearly are important factors to ensure that the partnership will enhance the mutual goals, the benefits, and the reciprocity that partners expect from it.<sup>6</sup>

The challenges of setting up partnerships call for the active contribution of key stakeholders.<sup>7</sup> The World Health Organization has identified 5 principal partners: policy makers, health managers, health professionals, academic institutions, and communities. Although all have their strengths and constraints, they share a common set of values such as quality, equity, relevance, and

cost-effectiveness, as well as a certain vision for future health services delivery. These common values make it possible to establish working relationships with the common aim of creating health services based on people's needs and, finally, to anticipate "productive and mutually rewarding partnership[s]."<sup>7</sup>

**Partnerships and ethical considerations.** Although partnership is seen as an interorganizational relationship, it most often occurs between leaders participating in a project. These people might take positions different from those of their institution or compensate for their lack of position. When 1 or more members risk adopting behaviour that cannot be justified in the light of shared values, ethical dilemmas might emerge. These situations can undermine the objectives and the achievement of the partnership's mission.

Equitable partnership—ie, to be "impartial, just and fair to all parties as dictated by *reason and conscience*"—is often emphasized in partnership development.<sup>8</sup> Measurable indicators for equitable partnerships have been identified, such as transparency, respect, solidarity, and equity.<sup>9</sup> In their highest form these values are to be lived, not only in collective accomplishments but also in the way those accomplishments are achieved, including the implementation of partnership governance models. It is therefore important to be able to refer to a document that provides guidelines when managing and responding to complex situations or thorny problems. It is also important to have a reference guide that helps decision making in accordance with the rules, norms, and values promoted by the partnership in question.

**Case description.** You have just started a new international partnership as part of a primary care improvement project. The needs are great and the funding, although attractive, will probably not be enough to reach your goals completely. In parallel with this project, your partner is taking steps to develop a new specialized private clinic service in his environment and he would like to use the prestige of your university to obtain funding for this project. This new request will directly compete with the first project for limited time and resources. In addition, this new project does not meet the criteria of social responsibility, which is a key value of your university mission. You are uncomfortable with the request of your partner but you are thinking first and foremost that you do not want to interfere with the project already under way. You want to be sure you make the decision that ensures the objectives of the initial project are not compromised, which will have a direct effect on improving the health of the population. In such a context, how do you know or make the best ethical decision?

**The importance of having an ethical framework.** Having an ethical framework for partnerships can be very useful,

as disagreements can be real and important. Not every decision requires application of an ethical framework. In some situations, however, the right thing to do might be unclear or doing it difficult.<sup>10</sup> For example,

- you might know the "right" thing to do in a situation, but encounter organizational or personal barriers, or you might encounter a situation where 2 equally important values seem to conflict;
- there might be conflict between members of a team around a challenging situation, often stemming from differing professional roles, beliefs, or worldviews; or
- there might be moral ambiguity—a situation characterized by uncertainty about the right thing to do either because it is novel or because it has unique features that make standards of practice difficult to apply.

An ethical framework can also help to overcome the limitations of conventions. The conclusion of a cooperation agreement does not mean that a number of underlying issues have been sufficiently explicit on both sides. Latent disagreements might remain that cannot be resolved over time by recourse to simple ethical rules, but which could have been resolved through previous discussions.

An ethical framework is therefore a complement to other resources to facilitate and strengthen partnerships among key stakeholders. It provides ethical guidance to those responsible for undertaking and overseeing partnership activities, given the challenges—and ethical considerations—inherent in linking cultures, goals, and processes across sectors. It also reassures members and the general public about the quality of services provided.

**Ethical decision-making process.** As a hub of international collaboration advancing family medicine globally, the Besroure Centre welcomes new partnerships. The organization strives to ensure that partners with such responsibility do the "right thing" in order to establish better health for all. But without an evaluation framework, it cannot make such assessments. An explicit ethical framework can then have considerable practical usefulness that can improve support in the area of partnerships.

**Principles underlying ethical decision making.** Principles for ethically sound international academic partnerships have been advanced as a response to the flawed nature of many North-South research partnerships.<sup>11-14</sup> Based upon the values of the Besroure Centre and those put forward during the 2 workshops dedicated to the development of this ethical framework, we suggest a set of 10 core principles that members of the Canadian global health community need to consider when they engage in partnerships. Together, these principles (see **Figure 1** and the electronic supplementary material available from **CFPlus\***)

\*Additional supplemental material outlining the principles and process is available at [www.cfp.ca](http://www.cfp.ca). Go to the full text of the article online and click on the **CFPlus** tab.

create a structured guide that stakeholders in partnerships might find helpful to identify potential ethical issues in interventions and actions, to reduce the creation of ethical tensions, and to assist in decision-making processes. These principles are complementary and interdependent; however, each principle in the framework should not be independently morally binding.<sup>11,15</sup> How they apply and the weight accorded to each will depend on the nature and context of the partnership being undertaken. There will be times when actions are approved despite 1 or more of the principles not being met.

**Frameworks for decision making.** Translating values into action requires a practised method for exploring and weighing the ethical aspects of a decision that should guide a course of action. Based on the principles here, using a framework to engage in ethical decision making regarding partnerships will help the members of the Canadian global health community and their partners to decide on the best approach for their situation and needs, whether at the initiation, maintenance, or reinforcement stage of a partnership.

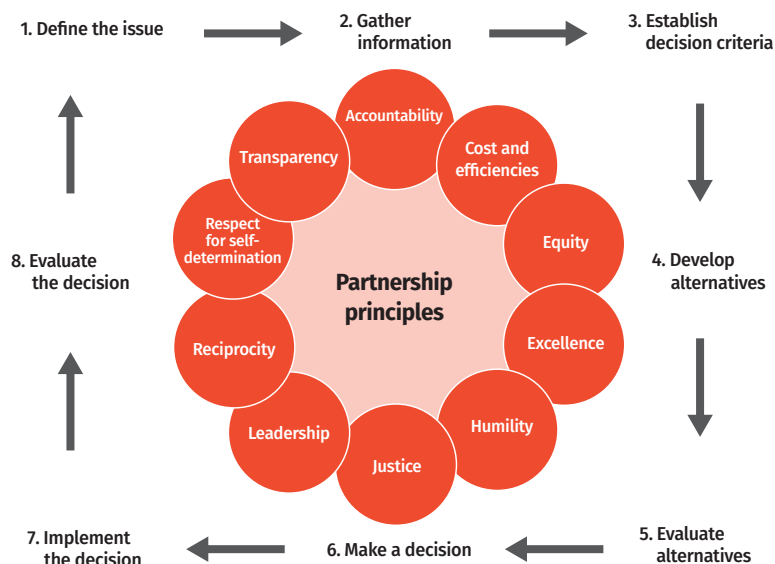
**Establishing partnerships: choosing ethical partners.** Over the course of the 2 workshops described above, the Besroure Centre facilitated a series of activities that fostered the framework development (Table 1).<sup>13,16</sup> It is most useful when implemented as early as possible in the collaborative process, before formulation of the partnership design.

Using this framework, potential partners can identify and address the most important issues in their collective

capacity to establish a partnership. Such a framework does not indicate the level of determination to proceed with or abandon a partnership. A “go-no-go” strategy can help stakeholders assess the value, risks, and implications of a partnership so that they can confidently go ahead, know that more information or negotiation is required, or decide not to proceed. The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation in Australia has a Partnerships Analysis Tool available to organizations entering or working in a partnership to assess, monitor, and maximize the ongoing effectiveness of the partnership.<sup>17</sup> This involves completing a checklist that rates 7 areas of a successful partnership, similar to those presented in Table 1. This checklist is useful for members of the Canadian global health community in their go-no-go decision for an ethically sound international academic partnership.

**Managing partnerships: aligning with the ethical principles of the partner organizations.** Ethical issues of decision making in partnerships arise at every stage of the process. Ongoing collaboration throughout the partnership is essential for an ethical partnership, and partners should reach mutual decisions about every stage of the process from its design and implementation to its ending. Partner organizations should be aligned in their ethical principles. To that end, a reflective, deliberative process is essential, as each partner will have their own concerns and interests. There are a number of key steps that partners should consider to have ethically aligned relationships. This process can be seen in the electronic supplementary material available from CFPlus.\*

Figure 1. Principles guiding the action of the stakeholders in the partnership



**Table 1. Framework for choosing ethical partners**

AREAS OF SUCCESS	ACTIVITIES
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and define the social, economic, language, and cultural characteristics of the community that is expected to benefit from the partnership</li> <li>• Identify key stakeholders who need to be involved in the partnership</li> <li>• Develop strategies that foster the involvement of stakeholders</li> <li>• Make use of pre-existing relationships or networks among stakeholders that can facilitate the partnership process</li> </ul>
Goals and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the goals and expectations of each potential partner</li> <li>• Discuss the pros and cons of working together, giving special attention to completed or ongoing joint projects</li> <li>• Define principles that promote transparency and mutual exchange of information</li> </ul>
Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster a critical understanding of each partner's limitations to contributing to the partnership, with particular attention paid to competing priorities</li> <li>• Work to elicit concerns about the collaborative process, giving careful attention to issues of partners' readiness to participate</li> <li>• Assess potential partners' capacity to engage in the partnership including their time demands and staffing</li> <li>• Identify important administrative functions and activities to facilitate the partnership</li> </ul>
Risks and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss the risks and benefits of the partnership for all parties</li> </ul>
Deliverables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree about who will own specific products, including data, instruments, or intervention materials</li> <li>• Establish policies regarding authorship on manuscripts and other presentations</li> <li>• Discuss the potential for dissemination of program curricula, products, or other materials among current as well as new partners</li> </ul>
Remedies for problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a mechanism for allowing modification when unanticipated events affect the partnership</li> <li>• Create a mechanism for monitoring partnership activities to ensure quality and address problems as they arise</li> <li>• Establish a contingency plan, with consequences for nondelivery or delays</li> <li>• Have alternates to key positions in the partnership team</li> </ul>

**Case deliberation.** After considering the principles guiding the action of the stakeholders in the partnership and following the steps of decision support, the best ethical decision would result from the following activities.

*Context:* Review and define the social, economic, language, and cultural characteristics of the community that is expected to benefit from the partnership. Develop strategies that foster the involvement of stakeholders.

*Goals and expectations:* Identify the goals and expectations of each potential partner. Discuss the pros and cons of working together, giving special attention to completed or ongoing joint projects. Define principles that promote transparency and mutual exchange of information.

*Logistics:* Foster a critical understanding of each partner's limitations in terms of contributing to the partnership, with particular attention paid to competing priorities. Work to elicit concerns about the collaborative process, giving careful attention to issues of partners' readiness to participate.

*Remedies for problems:* Create a mechanism for allowing modification when unanticipated events affect the partnership. Create a mechanism for monitoring partnership activities to ensure quality and to address problems as they arise.

**Case resolution.** After this reflection, you realize that you have extensively discussed with the partner your respective commitments and the values that

support your involvement. You have already provided a mechanism to guide you in decision making or managing conflicts that are bound to arise. This approach has also allowed you to better know your partner, to share your respective visions, and to harmonize them while making sure that the project will be consistent with the values of each of your institutions. You had also completed a document that formalized the ethical framework of your partnership and mentioned that in any situation where one of the partners would consider making modifications to the initial agreement, this could only happen with the agreement of both partners, and that these changes should respect the original ethical framework. You rely on these documents to discuss the new proposal and soon you both come to the conclusion that this request could jeopardize the original project and would not contribute to achieving the goal of improving the health of the population in the spirit of health equity that is at the heart of the project. Your partnership continues on this basis, and a situation that could have generated tensions is solved without affecting the links that unite you.

## Conclusion

The reflexive, deliberative process of this framework promotes a cohesive and transparent structure for discussions, ensuring all important aspects of a collaborative process are considered. These include fostering fairness, transparency, and consistency in decision

making, thus reducing the potential for inequity, and supporting a process that ensures decisions are rooted in ethical values. It is in this spirit that this framework has been designed to enable consistency among decisions, ensure that decisions reflect stakeholder values, and enhance partners' ability to consider ethical issues in a structured and formal way. We believe that this framework demonstrates its usefulness for establishing ethically sound international academic partnerships, tangible benefits for all parties, and lasting relationships that endure beyond the scope of a partnership agreement. 🍁

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#### Competing interests

None declared

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