

What makes research partnerships good, and why?

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Advancing collaborative research for health: why does collaboration matter?

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ABSTRACT

The calls for health research to be collaborative are ubiquitous—even as part of a recent World Health Assembly resolution on clinical trials—yet the arguments in support of collaborative research have been taken for granted and are absent in the literature. This article provides three arguments to justify why health research ought to be collaborative and discusses trade-offs to be considered among the ethical values guiding each argument.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that the impact of research is not limited to advancing people's health in the future. Research can also be impactful for current health threats.¹ Research that was conducted very quickly led to the timely development of effective COVID-19 diagnostic tests, vaccines, therapeutics and public health interventions.² Yet this success story should not obscure challenges in the conduct of COVID-19 research.³ For example, multiple repetitive, small trials have consumed an important share of research resources while not being able to yield much-needed knowledge about the efficacy of the interventions under study.^{4–7} These challenges have been acknowledged to the extent that there have been various calls for increased collaboration in research,^{3 8–10} along with a World Health Assembly resolution calling for increased coordination of clinical trials.¹¹ Furthermore, as part of the response to the mpox emergency, WHO urged for 'collaborative research'.¹²

The call for research to be collaborative has been ubiquitous, even before the pandemic,^{13–17} yet the justification to proceed collaboratively when conducting research is not obvious. What do collaborations add to research? Why should we advance research collaborations, instead of just ensuring that research needs are met? Why are research collaborations described as an ethical imperative, particularly in the context of health emergencies?

SUMMARY BOX

⇒ Health research ought to be collaborative in emergency and non-emergency situations.
⇒ Arguments for collaborations in health research are grounded in the values of efficiency, benefit maximisation and equity.
⇒ Health research collaboration can encompass many differences and take place in very diverse settings. The values of efficiency, benefit maximisation and equity do not dictate a formula for research collaborations in specific circumstances.
⇒ It may be necessary to consider trade-offs between these values. One may be justified to depart from (more robust) collaboration in specific circumstances. However, it is never acceptable to compromise respect and fairness to advance research collaboration.

In this article, we explain why research collaborations are ethically valuable, provide three arguments to justify why health research ought to be collaborative and discuss trade-offs to be considered among the ethical values guiding each argument.

AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATIVE HEALTH RESEARCH

Health is recognised as a common good^{18 19} that critically affects our life prospects and welfare, even our very survival. Health research is vital for advancing health; it is through the conduct of research that we find cures for diseases and ways to prevent and alleviate suffering. To the extent that we ought to promote health, we ought to promote health research.²⁰ The ethical value of health confers ethical value to health research.

Therefore, health research is not an ethically neutral activity; that is, one that is impartial to what is ethically valuable and as such optional. Research is an ethically loaded undertaking because it is crucial to advance our common good.²¹ While the connection between research and our health and well-being has been globally palpable during the



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What makes health research partnerships good, and why?

Ethical character of health research frames discussion of health research collaborations / partnerships.



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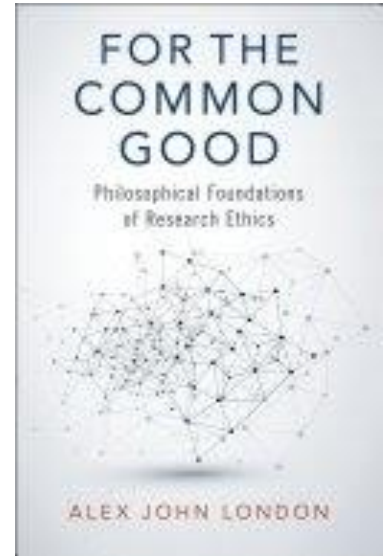
Health research is an ethical endeavor

Ethical value of health confers ethical value to health research:

- To the extent we ought to promote health, we ought to promote health research.

The way in which we do health research matters ethically:

- Faster / slower, with greater / less impact, with benefits reaching more / less people.



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We ought to establish research partnerships

With researchers:

1. where research is going to be conducted.
2. where research results are expected to be beneficial.
3. conducting similar studies (to avoid duplications).
4. with relevant expertise, regardless where research will take place of where results are expected to be beneficial.

More robust partnerships: More of 1, 2, 3 and 4.



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Values that make health research partnerships good i.e. why we should seek partnerships in health research

1. Efficiency	➤ To expedite the conduct of research
2. Benefit maximization	➤ To facilitate the implementation of research results
3. Equity	➤ To build research capacity



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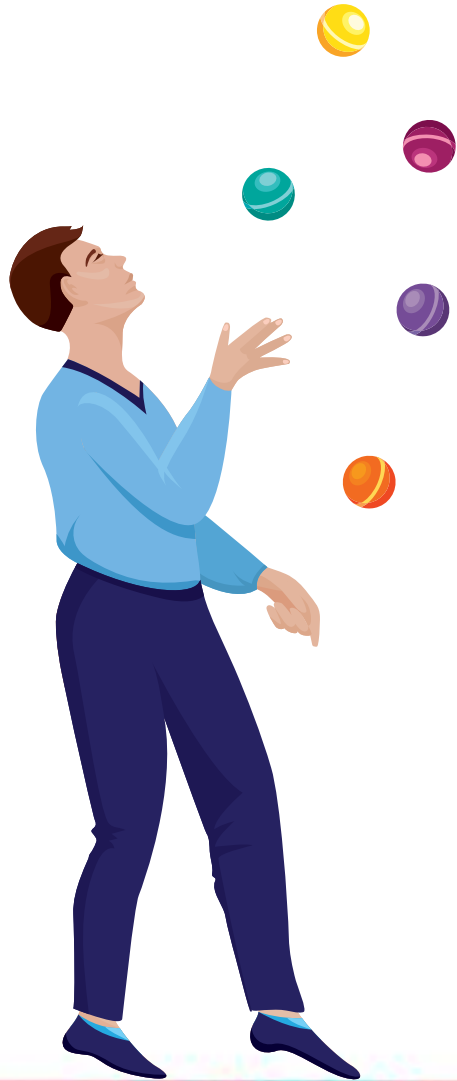
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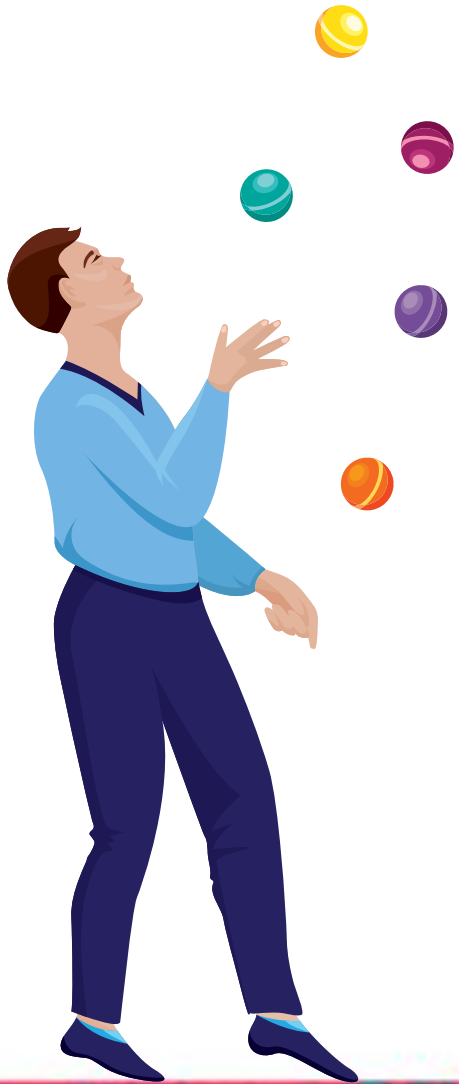


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Balancing different values

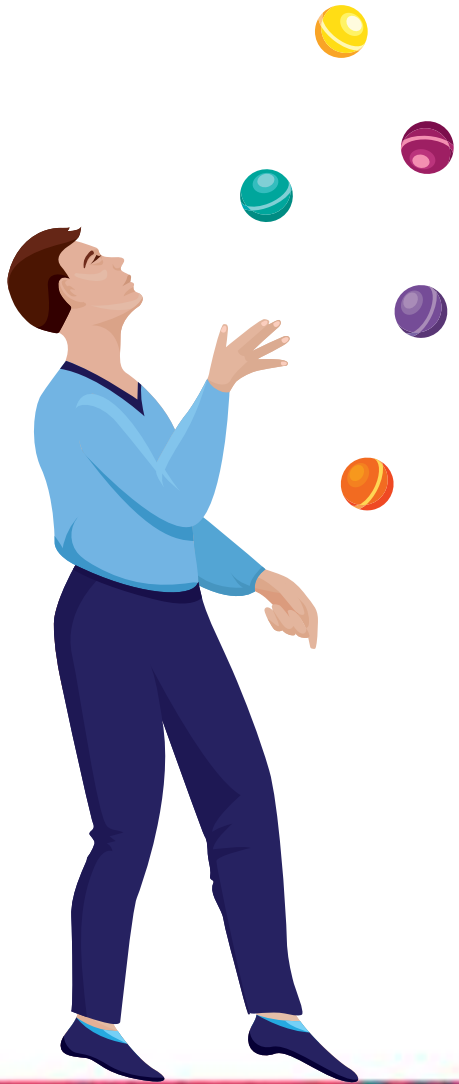
- Different types of research, different scenarios,...
- And values get realized in different timeframes.



Values should be balanced in each specific case

Acceptable tradeoffs

- Between the values of efficiency, benefit maximization, and equity.



Values should be balanced in each specific case

Acceptable tradeoffs

- Between the values of efficiency, benefit maximization, and equity.

Unacceptable tradeoffs

- Respect and fairness (research integrity standards) must never be compromised.

New paradigm: Health research collaborations are an ethical duty

- Not a matter of preference or convenience.
- Not a bonus but the way we ought to do health research.

Researchers may depart from that duty, provided there are good reasons to do so.

- “Default”: Most robust collaboration (1-4).
- Researcher: justify departures.



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