The COMETS advisory body

An introduction

Created in 1994, the CNRS Ethics Committee (COMETS) is an independent advisory body whose Opinions are made public. Reporting to the CNRS Board of Trustees, COMETS investigates issues referred to it by the Board of Trustees, the Scientific Board or the CNRS President. It may also investigate matters on its own initiative. Its independence guarantees an unbiased approach to the ethical scope of major research challenges.

COMETS Mandates

COMETS initiates discussions on the general ethics questions that arise when practising research, and linked to:
1. the social and moral consequences of the development of sciences and of their practical applications,
2. the principles governing researchers’ individual behaviour and the functioning of CNRS bodies, and
3. the exercise of science itself.

Having thoroughly considered matters, COMETS then draws up recommendations relating to the definition, justification and application of rules concerning research integrity and ethics. Through its Opinions and the training initiatives that it undertakes or in which it participates, COMETS draws the attention of research and management staff to the ethical and societal dimensions of research. In doing so, it aims to shed light on research freedoms bearing in mind the duties and responsibilities which staff members have towards the CNRS and more generally towards society.

COMETS is a forum for reflection, not an operational ethics committee responsible for accrediting projects. It has no authority for handling violations of the rules of scientific integrity and does not rule on individual cases, whether in relation to scientific projects or the misconduct of researchers.

Ethics and integrity

COMETS was a driving force behind the drafting and promotion of the French National Charter for Research Integrity signed in 2015 by numerous research institutes (including the CNRS, INRIA and INSERM) and the Conference of University Presidents (CPU). It then took an active part in discussions about scientific integrity and the implementation of OFIS, the French Office for Scientific Integrity. COMETS is the author of ‘Integrity and Responsibility in Research Practices’, a guide which is now common to the CNRS and CPU, and available on the CNRS, CPU and COMETS websites: www.cnrs.fr/comets.
A selection of Opinions

COMETS has produced a great many Opinions, all available on its website. These include:

- Research: a global right (2018),
- Freedom in research, scientific responsibility and the precautionary principle (2018),
- Researchers' attitudes to truth in the post-truth era (2018),
- Sexual harassment in the laboratory: some ethical considerations (2018),
- Ethical reflection on plagiarism in scientific research (2017),
- How the CNRS can respond to scientific integrity violations (2016),
- Discussion and moderation of scientific publications on social networks and in the media: ethical issues (2016),
- Citizen science (2015),
- The ethical challenges of the sharing of scientific data (2015),
- Politics of excellence in research (2014),
- Ethical issues affecting public research professions undergoing profound change (2014),
- Natural risks, assessment and crisis situations (2013),
- The ethics charter of scientific evaluators (2012),
- Open access to scientific publications (2012),
- Ethical aspects of the public funding of project-oriented research (2010),
- Research ethics for social experimentation (2010), Research ethics for information and communication science and technology (ICST) (2009).

Work in progress

COMETS is currently focusing on the following 5 themes:

- Conflicts of interests,
- Typology of research data,
- Neurocognitive technologies,
- Robots and agents: autonomy and responsibility,
- Science and Diplomacy.

How COMETS works

COMETS’ deliberations are fuelled by practical examples. It keeps abreast of information through its close ties with the various CNRS bodies (including scientific departments and National Committee sections). It collects information in order to identify issues requiring ethical considerations. It implements tools through which it establishes and maintains constant contact with researchers and laboratories. The committee aims to shed light on new situations opened up by research, taking into account existing regulations.

In any case, the committee’s opinions—which may be contradictory—are motivated by and based on both its respect for fundamental rights (particularly human rights) and its refusal of a dogmatic vision.

The committee tailors its work to:

1. quickly provide concise declarations of principle on pending questions after discussion in plenary session;
2. initiate an extensive review of subjects considered a priority, while calling upon external contributions when necessary. The final document is discussed and validated in plenary session, then published in the form of an Opinion.

The committee continues to build successful relationships with other players in the scientific ethics arena in France and abroad.

COMETS members

COMETS consists of a chair and 12 members appointed by the CNRS Board of Trustees. It represents all disciplines and respects gender parity.

The COMETS chair: Jean-Gabriel GANASCIA, professor at Sorbonne University (Paris), computer scientist, expert in artificial intelligence.

COMETS members:

- Michèle LEDUC, emeritus senior researcher at the CNRS, physicist
- Philippe ASKENAZY, CNRS senior researcher and professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, economist
- Catherine JEANDEL, CNRS senior researcher, geophysicist
- Patrice DEBRÉ, honorary professor at Pierre and Marie Curie University (Paris), doctor, expert in immunology
- Frédérique LEICHTER-FLACK, lecturer at Paris-X University (Nanterre), essayist and professor of comparative literature
- Jean-Paul DELAHAYE, emeritus professor at Lille University, mathematician and IT specialist
- Lucienne LETELLIER, emeritus senior researcher at the CNRS, biophysicist
- Didier GOURIER, professor at ParisTech, chemist
- Antoinette MOLINIE, emeritus senior researcher at the CNRS/LESC (Nanterre), anthropologist
- Rémy MOSSERI, CNRS senior researcher at Sorbonne University (Paris), theoretical physicist
- Nathalie NEVEJANS, lecturer in the Faculty of Law of Douai at Artois University, lawyer, private law
- Jean-Pierre POUSSIN, member of the CRCC regional body of statutory auditors, lawyer.

Permanent guests of the COMETS:

- Alain RENÉ, in charge of the bioethical regulations unit of the CNRS Institute of Biological Sciences, neurobiologist
- Sophie CROZIER, observer for the CNCE, a French national advisory board on ethics, Gilles ADDA, CNRS representative on the CNCE
- Antoine PETIT, CNRS President,
- Dorothée BERTHOMIEU, chair of the CNRS Scientific Board.

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