ANNUAL REPORT 2023

Centre for Epidemic Interventions Research (CEIR)

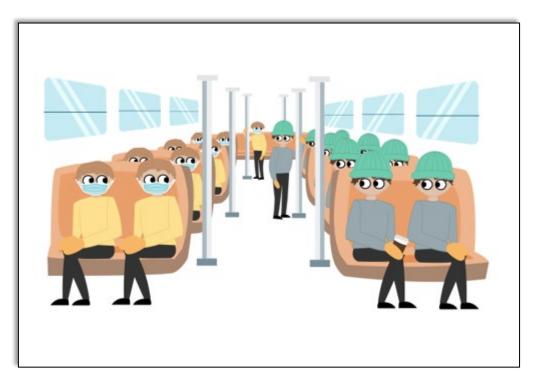
Research to inform decisions about public health and social measures in epidemics, and to reduce the harm of misinformation.



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Annual Report 2023

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Ill.: NIPH/Sara Martine Berge



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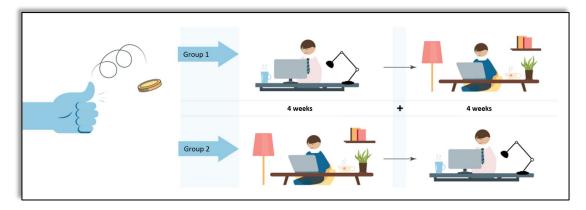
Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Norwegian Ministry of Health asked the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH) to establish a research centre to support decision making in epidemics. The request was directly related to the weak evidence base for the effects of infection control interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Centre for Epidemic Interventions Research (CEIR) was formally established in the autumn of 2021, hosted by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH).

CEIR has been tasked with three main activities, as defined by the following aims:

- 1. Prepare for the conduct of studies of effects of non-pharmaceutical infection control measures.
- 2. Carry out effect studies of infection control measures.
- 3. Develop and evaluate tools to support the use of research in decision-making in health crises and improve critical health literacy in the population.



Ill.: NIPH

Activities 2023

In addition to carrying out research projects directly related to the center's stated aims, in our second full year of operation CEIR has invested time and resources in building collaborative relationships and launching a prioritization exercise to guide the future activities of the centre.

CEIR is organizationally and physically placed within the Division for Health Services at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. Formal arrangements are in place with staff from the Division of Infection Control and the Division of Mental and Physical Health, allocating part of their work time to supporting CEIR.

We held the second meeting with our National Advisory Board in May 2023.

CEIR web page: www.fhi.no/en/more/research-centres/ceir/

AIM 1 – Prepare for the conduct of studies of effect of non-pharmaceutical infection control measures:

- CEIR is conducting a prioritization exercise using consensus methods to identify the most pressing research questions to address in our future projects. User involvement is ensured by inviting a wide group of stakeholders to participate in a survey and by engaging directly with staff from the Division of Infection Control (NIPH) and our National Advisory Board in the process. We are aiming for a structured and transparent process that will be finalized in the first half of 2024 (see protocol).
- Informed consent requirements for trials of public health measures have hindered several planned CEIR-studies, and centre staff have contributed to the public debate about this barrier at meetings and conferences, both nationally and internationally.
- As a follow-up to rejections of our projects by the Regional Ethics Committees (REK), often related to informed consent requirements, we have met with members of REK to discuss how to potentially move this topic forward.
- CEIR has been responsible for carrying out a project commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Care Services, to map the use of randomized and quasi-experimental studies in the public sector in Norway, including the barriers to carrying out such effectiveness evaluations.
- CEIR-researchers have, in collaboration with colleagues at the World Health Organization (WHO), supported a team at the American University of Beirut that were commissioned to carry out a review of the evidence on the effects of public health and social measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will provide an overview of existing research and identify important gaps. The report is in the process of being published.

AIM 2 – Carry out effect studies of infection control measures:

Completed randomized trials:

- General practitioner phone calls to improve COVID-19 vaccine uptake among patients at increased risk of severe COVID-19 (publication)
- *Face masks to protect against respiratory infection* (protocol study report submitted for publication)

Ongoing trial:

• *The evaluation of NOST – a tool for observing infection control measures in the health service* (protocol).

Preparations for pilot study:

• *Pilot study of air cleaners in classrooms*. This has been a major CEIR-undertaking in 2023. The study went through ethics approval processes and participating schools have been recruited. The pilot study is ongoing (commenced in January 2024).

Trials that were initiated, but halted:

- 2nd booster trial: At the request of the Division for Infection Control (Norwegian Institute of Public Health) we planned a trial to test the effectiveness of offering a 2nd booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. We started working on this in 2022. The trial was <u>registered in the ClinicalTrials.gov database</u> and all necessary legal, ethical, and logistical requirements were secured, but we did not get final go-ahead from the Ministry of Health and Care Services.
- *Home office trial:* Despite moral support from key stakeholders, including LO-Norway and NHO The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, recruiting companies and organization to participate proved to be very difficult. An alternative recruitment strategy is being considered for 2024.
- *Air cleaners in bars and restaurants:* This trial was approved by the regional ethics committee (REK), but the pilot phase revealed that there were major practical and economical barriers to conducting the trial.

Quasi-experimental studies (ongoing analyses):

- *School closures:* Here the aim is to assess the association between school closures and infections spread.
- *Restricting visitor access to long-term care facilities:* Here we plan to study the association between the restriction on visitor access and incidence of COVID-19 infections.

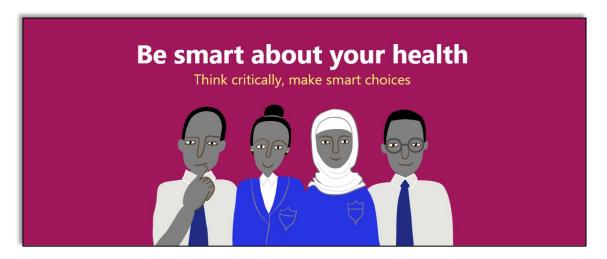
AIM 3 – Develop and evaluate tools to support the use of research in decisionmaking in health crises, and improve critical health literacy in the population:

- In 2023 the CHOICE-project was completed. The project included three large, randomized trials to evaluate *learning resources aimed at improving students' ability to critically assess health claims* a skill that is particularly relevant in the face of "infodemics" during epidemics and other health crises. The trials took place in Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda and were conducted with partners linked to the <u>Informed Health Choices Network (publication 1, publication 2, publication 3</u>). A meta-analysis of the three trial results together, was also published (<u>publication</u>)
- In parallel, several steps were made to promote the use of our resources in various settings in Norway, including a formal collaboration with the <u>Norwegian Resource</u> <u>Centre for School Health</u> on a project to map the perceived need and usefulness of resources for schools nurses, to help them *improve the pupils' ability to critically assess health claims*. We are also in the process of piloting our resources in Norwegian nurseries and primary schools.
- CEIR has, in collaboration with the Epistemonikos Foundation in Chile and InfoDesign Lab in Oslo, continued to develop the interactive Evidence to Decision (iEtD) framework/tool, to *support transparent and informed decision-making among policymakers* and other decisionmakers, e.g., health professionals and health authorities making recommendations.¹ In 2023 the focus was on improving the tool's user friendliness.
- CEIR launched <u>The Message Lab</u> in late 2022 an approach to testing *different ways of communicating information about the effects of interventions* to the general population, or other groups. A <u>first pilot trial</u> was conducted in 2023, with the goal of assessing different ways of presenting uncertainty about research findings. Online participants were recruited in Norway and the USA. Outcome measures included understanding of uncertainty, perceived benefit and harm, and intended behaviors.
- The interactive Summary of Qualitative findings (iSoQ) tool is a free, online, interactive platform *to support authors of qualitative evidence syntheses* to apply the GRADE-CERQual approach for assessing how much confidence to place in the findings of their syntheses.² In collaboration with the Epistemonikos Foundation and Megan Wainwright Consulting version 2 of iSoQ was completed in 2023. We launched this for use internationally and now have close to 500 users.
- Together with political scientists in Bergen, Trondheim, and Toronto we are systematically reviewing examples of *public participation in decisions about public health and social measures* used to manage the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of this review is to inform decisions about how best to enable public participation and deliberation in decisions about public health and social measures, and to inform decisions about public participation in the context of pandemics and epidemics. The results will be published in 2024.
- In the SUPPORT-SYSTEMS project we explore *whether decision-making processes for health systems strengthening, and universal health coverage (UHC) can be made more inclusive, responsive and accountable.* We focus on the extent to which actively

¹ A recent example of the application of the Evidence-to-decision framework: <u>Infection prevention and control in</u> the context of coronavirus disease (COVID-19): a living guideline. World Health Organization 2023.

² A recent example of the application of the GRADE-CERQual approach: Meskell P et al. <u>Factors that impact on</u> recruitment to vaccine trials in the context of a pandemic or epidemic: a qualitative evidence synthesis. Cochrane Database Syst Rev. 2023 Sep 1;9(9).

involving civil society voices and other stakeholders can humanize decision-making processes for UHC and promote equity.



Ill.: NIPH/Sarah Rosenbaum

Finances

CEIR is funded primarily through the core funding of the Norwegian Institute of Public health. In addition, CEIR received funding from the Norwegian Research Council for the CHOICE-project and SUPPORT-SYSTEMS-project (described above). CEIR submitted two proposals to the Norwegian Research Council in 2023 – neither succeeded. CEIR-staff also led the work on a large international application to EU's Horizon program with partners in Sweden, France, Austria, Spain and Norway (awaiting assessment).

WHO-collaborating centre

CEIR aims to achieve status as a WHO-collaborating centre. We have been in dialogue with WHO about this since the centre was established, and especially during the last year. We expect to apply in the first half of 2024.

CEIR-staff 2023

- Mona Bjørbæk, Senior Advisor (100%)
- Ingeborg H. Elgersma, Researcher (100%)
- Cathinka Halle Julin, Researcher (100%)
- Petter Elstrøm, Researcher (100%)
- Signe Flottorp, Researcher (100%)
- Atle Fretheim, Centre Director (100%)
- Christine Holst, Researcher (100%)
- Unni Gopinathan, Researcher (80%)
- Heather Munthe-Kaas, Researcher (50%)
- Andy Oxman, Researcher (100%)
- Matthew Prescott Oxman, PhD-candidate (100%)
- Christopher J. Rose, Statistician (50%)
- Sarah Rosenbaum, Researcher (100%)
- Runar Solberg, Researcher (100%)
- Tone Bruun, Epidemiologist (40%)
- Arnfinn Helleve, Researcher (20%)
- Simon Lewin, Researcher (10%)
- Annlaug Selstø, Senior Advisor (50%)

National Advisory Board

- Bjørn-Inge Larsen (Head of Advisory Board), Helse- og omsorgsdepartementet (Ministry of Health and Care Services)
- Irja Anthi, Landsorganisasjonen i Norge (LO) (Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions)
- Eirik Nikolai Arnesen, Legeforeningen (Norwegian Medical Association)
- Liv Arum, Pensjonistforbundet (Norwegian Pensioners' Assocation)
- Ingrid Tyridal Bjerring, Kommuneoverlege, Lier commune (Municipal Chief Medical Officer, Lier Municipality)
- Anita Brekken, Norsk Sykepleierforbund (Norwegian Nurses Organisation)
- Esperanza Diaz, Pandemisenteret, Universitetet i Bergen (University of Bergen)
- Per Øystein Eikrem, Finansdepartementet (Ministry of Finance)
- Merete Habberstad, NHO reiseliv (Norwegian Hospitality Association)
- Håkon Kavli, Kunnskapsdepartementet (Ministry of Education and Research)
- Hege Lorentzen, Kommunesektorens organisasjon (KS) (Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities)
- Espen Nakstad, Helsedirektoratet (Norwegian Directorate of Health)
- Herdis Nundal, Caritas Norge (Caritas Norway)
- Einar Ove Standal, Utdanningsforbundet (Union of Education Norway)
- Bente Westrum, Statsforvalteren i Innlandet (County Governor, Innlandet)

Publications 2023

In scientific journals

- Tuv M, Elgersma IH, Furuseth E, Holst C, Helleve A, Fretheim A. <u>General practitioner phone</u> calls to improve COVID-19 vaccine uptake among patients at increased risk of severe COVID-<u>19: A randomised trial.</u> BJGP Open. 2023 Feb 8:BJGP0.2022.0175. doi: 10.3399/BJGP0.2022.0175.
- Elgersma IH, Fretheim A, Elstrøm P, Aavitsland P. <u>Association between face mask use and</u> <u>risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection: Cross-sectional study.</u> Epidemiol Infect. 2023 Nov 13;151:e194. doi: 10.1017/S0950268823001826.
- Langlete, M. Tesli, L. Veneti, J. Starrfelt, P. Elstrøm, H. Meijerink, Estimated vaccine effectiveness against SARS-CoV-2 Delta and Omicron infections among health care workers and the general adult population in Norway. Vaccine (2023), doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2023.05.022
- Elgersma, I.H., Hart, R.K., Straiton, M.L. et al. <u>Migrant background and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental healthcare consultations among children and adolescents in Norway: a nationwide registry study.</u> BMC Health Serv Res 23, 718 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-023-09666-3
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- Mugisha M, Nyirazinyoye L, Simbi CMC, Chesire F, Senyonga R, Oxman M, Nsangi A, Semakula D, Rose CJ, Moberg J, Dahlgren A, Kaseje M, Lewin S, Sewankambo NK, Rosenbaum S, Oxman AD. Effects of the Informed Health Choices secondary school intervention on the ability of students in Rwanda to think critically about health choices: A cluster-randomized trial. J Evid Based Med. 2023: https://doi.org/10.1111/jebm.12551
- Ssenyonga R, Oxman AD, Nakyejwe E, Chesire F, Mugisha M, Nsangi A, Semakula D, Oxman M, Rose CJ, Rosenbaum SE, Moberg J, Kaseje M, Nyirazinyoye L, Dahlgren A, Lewin S, Sewankambo NK. Use of the informed health choices educational intervention to improve secondary students' ability to think critically about health interventions in Uganda: A cluster-randomized trial. J Evid Based Med. 2023: https://doi.org/10.1111/jebm.12553
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- Dahlgren A, Semakula D, Chesire F, Mugisha M, Nakyejwe E, Nsangi A, Nyirazinyoye L, Ochieng MA, Oxman AD, Ssenyonga R, Simbi CMC. <u>Critical thinking about treatment effects in Eastern</u> <u>Africa: development and Rasch analysis of an assessment tool.</u> F1000Research 2023, 12:887 https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.132052.1

- Rosenbaum S, Moberg J, Chesire F et al., including Lewin, S, Oxman, A, Oxman M. <u>Teaching</u> critical thinking about health information and choices in secondary schools: human-centred design of digital resources [version 1: peer review: awaiting peer review]. F1000Research 2023, 12:481 https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.132580.1
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- **Gopinathan U**. <u>Evidence-informed deliberative processes for UHC: progress, potential and prudence: Comment on "Evidence-informed deliberative processes for health benefit package design part II: a practical guide."</u> Int J Health Policy Manag. 2023;12:7541. doi:10.34172/ijhpm.2023.7541.
- Schünemann HJ, Brennan S, Akl EA, Hultcrantz M, Alonso-Coello P, Xia J, Davoli M, Rojas MX, Meerpohl JJ, Flottorp S, et. al. <u>The development methods of official GRADE articles and</u> <u>requirements for claiming the use of GRADE - a statement by the GRADE Guidance Group.</u> J Clin Epidemiol. 2023. doi:<u>https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2023.05.010</u>
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mastery on the Critical Thinking about Health Test? A consensus study. BMJ Open 2023;13:e066890. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2022-066890

• The Oslo Chronic Fatigue Consortium, incl. **Signe Agnes Flottorp**, (23 Sep 2023): <u>Chronic fatigue syndromes: real illnesses that people can recover from</u>, Scandinavian Journal of Primary Health Care, DOI: 10.1080/02813432.2023.2235609

Reports and working papers

• **Gopinathan U, Fretheim A**. <u>Randomiserte og kvasieksperimentelle studier i den statlige</u> <u>forvaltningen: en kartlegging. [Randomised and quasi-experimental studies in the public</u> <u>sector: a mapping study].</u> Rapport 2023. Oslo: Folkehelseinstituttet, 2023.

Study protocols

- Oxman, Matt, Oxman Andrew D., Fretheim, Atle, Lewin, Simon (2023). <u>Participants' and</u> investigators' experiences and views of potential adverse effects of an educational intervention: <u>Protocol for a qualitative evidence synthesis.</u> Zenodo. doi: 10.5281/zenodo.7681365
- Theilmann M, Ginindza N, Myeni J, Dlamini S et al., incl. Lewin S. <u>Strengthening primary care</u> for diabetes and hypertension in Eswatini: study protocol for a nationwide cluster-randomized controlled trial. 2023 Mar 22;24(1):210. doi: 10.1186/s13063-023-07096-4.
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Academic presentations etc.

- Rapid implementation of pragmatic clinical trials for health care emergencies. Clinical Research Day, Universität Basel, Switzerland. 16.02.2023 (Atle Fretheim)
- General practitioner phone calls to improve COVID-19 vaccine uptake among patients at increased risk of severe COVID-19: A randomised trial. Conference: Forsknings- og innovasjonsdagen: Forskning som nytter, Oslo, Norway. 7.3.2023 (Marit Tuv)
- Communicating uncertainty about the effects of wearing glasses to reduce the chance of getting COVID: a randomized trial (poster presentation) Conference: Forsknings- og innovasjonsdagen: Forskning som nytter, Oslo, Norway. 7.3.2023 (Christine Holst)
- FHI-erfaringer med vitenskapelig evaluering av tiltak under pandemien. Virker politikken? [*NIPH-experience with scientific evaluation of interventions during the pandemic. Do the policies work?*] Seminar, Gamle Festsal, Oslo, Norway. 28.03.2023 (Atle Fretheim)
- Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM): Filling the Knowledge Gap. IANPHI webinar. 15.03.2023 (Atle Fretheim)

- Conducting research to inform infection control policies during the pandemic: Many attempts, few successes. Building Bridges 2023: Crisis Preparedness Using the COVID-19 Pandemic as an Example, Helsinki, Finland (digital participation). 16.03.23 (Atle Fretheim)
- Implementing PHSM under conditions of uncertainty: what have we learned? ECDC-meeting in Stockholm, Sweden. 24.05.23 (Atle Fretheim)
- Implementing PHSM under conditions of uncertainty: what have we learned? WHO-PHSMmeeting in Cascai, Portugal. 08.06.2023 (Atle Fretheim)
- Policy challenges and research questions in the European Region the case of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. WHO joint webinar on Research Capacity Building for Health Emergencies. 18.07.23 (Atle Fretheim)
- Message Lab a platform for research and improvement of public health messages. Conference: Cochrane Colloquium, London, UK. 4.9.23 (Christine Holst)
- Developing digital resources to teach secondary school students to think critically about health information and choices: human-centered design. Conference: Cochrane Colloquium, London, UK. 05.09.23 (Sarah Rosenbaum)
- Presenting the results of a systematic review to non-experts: the Dissemination Checklist. Cochrane Colloquium, London, UK. 06.09.23 (Sarah Rosenbaum)
- Infection control in pandemics what works? The Letten Seminar: Tackling Global Health Threats – From Parasites to Pandemics. Academy of Science, Oslo, Norway. 07.09.23 (Atle Fretheim)
- Why So Few Randomized Trials of Public Health and Social Measures during the COVID-19 Pandemic? Insights from the Norwegian Context. Conference: Long-Term Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Society, Bergen, Norway. 27.10.23 (Ingeborg H. Elgersma and Runar Solberg)
- Message Lab a platform for developing and evaluating public health messages. Conference: Long-Term Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Society, Bergen, Norway. 27.10.23 (Christine Holst)
- Air Purifiers in Classrooms for Infection Control A Pilot Study (poster presentation). Conference: Long-Term Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Society, Bergen, Norway. 27.10.23 (Cathinka Halle Julin)
- Conducting randomized trials in and in preparation for health emergencies. Synapse Research Lab, University of Stavanger, Norway. 03.11.2023 (Atle Fretheim)



Photo: Ina L. Aasen



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