

Ethics, ethical human research and human research ethics committees

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Non-medical research involves the same issues of justice, beneficence, and respect for persons that apply to non-medical research. It also may involve risk of harm to participants, and conflicts of interest for researchers. It is therefore not possible to argue that such research should be exempt from ethical review. This paper argues that researchers should become more engaged with the ethical issues associated with their research, and that human research ethics committees and other institutional ethical review bodies should be viewed as resources which add value to the research process. To improve ethical review we need this engagement by researchers, and their involvement in the decision-making of ethics review bodies.

This paper is a response to the *Call for Papers* in *AUR* vol. 51, no. 1, which starts with two very narrow questions: 'Why would any university ethics committee think it necessary for ethics clearance to be granted to a researcher analysing data files that are publicly available?' and 'Why would an ethics committee require ethics clearance on a questionnaire on university reform to be administered to Vice-Chancellors?' A purely rule-based response would refer readers to the section of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (NH&MRC, 2007, p. 7) which states 'The National Statement must be used to inform the design, ethical review and conduct of human research that is funded by, or takes place under the auspices of, any of the bodies that have developed this *National Statement* (NHMRC, ARC, AVCC)'. It would then argue that this section clearly rules that research undertaken in universities should be subject to review

by a human research ethics committee (HREC) where required by the *National Statement*. It would then suggest that analysis of publicly available data files may fit within the description of 'negligible risk research' (NH&MRC, 2007, p. 18) and that the *National Statement* allows exemption from review of negligible risk research which involves the 'use of existing collections of data or records that contain only non-identifiable data about human beings' (p. 79). *Ipso facto*, no review needs to be conducted - although with the rider that the *National Statement* then goes on to say that 'Institutions must recognise that in deciding to exempt research from ethical review, they are determining that the research meets the requirements of this *National Statement* and is ethically acceptable' (p. 79). The questionnaire for Vice-Chancellors seems to fit the description of the type of 'low risk research' which the *National Statement* allows to be reviewed

at 'a non-HREC level' (p. 79). In both cases, the research does not require full review by a HREC. The survey of Vice-Chancellors would probably be reviewed in one of the non-HREC review processes allowed by the 2007 *National Statement*. This allows a system of review of low and negligible risk research by 'people who are familiar with this *National Statement* and have an understanding of the ethical issues that can arise in the research under review' (NH&MRC, 2007, p. 79). Under this process it is likely to have a time-frame of days, rather than weeks.

However, such a rule-based approach to the ethics and ethical review of non-medical research is singularly unhelpful. It sidesteps the possible issues associated with other forms of non-medical research and the role of Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs), and does not permit a full engagement of these issues by academic researchers. Discussions of research ethics should not be limited to avoiding review, or even avoiding the unethical (Macfarlane, 2009); rather, they should centre on the nature of what it means to be an ethical researcher and conduct ethical research, and the role of HRECs in this process. To this end, this paper will reflect upon some of these issues in non-medical areas, with particular emphasis on the discipline area, business, with which I am most familiar. However, other areas will be commented on in passing where appropriate.

To begin, it is helpful to look at some fictional examples of non-medical research, and ask if there are any ethical issues in each case, and if so, what they are.

Example 1: An education researcher wishes to test the effect of a particular teaching technique. She plans to allocate students to 2 groups: one who will get the new intervention, and the other which will get the traditional teaching methodology. Their year 12 exam results will be the dependent variable.

Example 2: A sociology researcher wishes to study attitudes to court victim impact statements. She plans to interview victims of crimes to assess whether the impact of the crime upon them was accurately described in the impact statements.

Example 3: A management student manages a fast food franchise which has introduced a new team-based leadership model. He wishes to evaluate the program by interviewing staff to see if they find the type of leadership provided by their team leaders to be effective.

Example 4: An Arts researcher is researching the life of a person prominent in their area. The subject's support is sought (and received) for the project, including

access to their papers and introductions to their colleagues and friends. The researcher's interpretation of the responses is particularly critical of their subject, and, in the interests of honesty, he wishes to publish this. If he does it will negatively affect the subject's career.

Example 5: A researcher wishes to test the hypothesis that exposure to violent video games, movies and television shows has desensitised younger people to emotionally arousing situations. They plan to conduct an experiment using under 20-year-olds and over 40-year-olds as participants, and expose them to an emotionally arousing video (of an amputation). They will then test participants' emotional response (dependent variable), and analyse the data statistically using average time spent each week on the relevant activities, age, and gender as the predictors.

Example 6: A researcher wishes to examine the frequency of illicit drug use among senior secondary school pupils.

An immediate response to example 1 is that if the new intervention is effective, then the students in that group will have an unfair advantage over students with the traditional teaching methodology – or vice versa. In example 2, the research, although not medical research, has the potential to distress participants. In example 3, the student researcher's role may become conflated with his management role, and negative reports heard of staff behaviour in interviews may affect the current, and future, careers of staff. In example 4, publication of the research will do reputational harm to the subject. In example 5, the research has the potential to cause significant stress in participants. In example 6, the research, when published, has the potential to cause a risk to the reputations of those students and schools known to be involved, and raises informed consent (how do the researchers fully communicate to students the risks of potential identification if the researcher were legally obliged to disclose sources? should students only participate if their parents give consent?) and duty of care issues. And, although drug use is itself not illegal, the possession and distribution of particular substances is illegal, as is driving under the influence of such substances.

Such examples suggest that not all non-medical research is 'negligible risk' or 'low risk' as defined in the *National Statement* (2007), and that non-medical researchers need to engage fully with the ethical issues involved in their research, and consider the pos-

sible protection of participants. The first issue then becomes what principles should be used to guide researchers. The second is whether such research should be reviewed by a HREC or other formal process, or whether Chief Investigators should be responsible for ensuring their own research is ethical.

What does it mean to be an ethical researcher?

I sincerely believe that no researcher in any field, whether medical or non-medical, wants to conduct research that is unethical or unjust, which has risks that outweigh the benefits, or which has no respect for persons. Although these principles come from a medical perspective that began as a response to the Nuremberg trials (Macfarlane, 2009), there is no argument which suggests they are less valid for non-medical research. However, ethical researching requires continual engagement. It is more than compliance, 'following the rules' or the law, or submitting HREC applications that are approved without questioning. The three core principles of justice, beneficence, and respect for persons appear in the research ethics guidelines of many countries (Macfarlane, 2009), including Australia's *National Statement* (NH&MRC 2007). To apply these criteria in the positive requires some deeper understanding of these concepts and their operationalisation. This will be done in the next section. Potential conflicts of interest will also be touched upon.

Justice

Aristotle (1982, p. 257) describes justice as 'that which is lawful and that which is equal and fair'. Justice in research requires that particular groups or individuals not bear the burden in terms of time, energy, discomfort/distress or disclosure, while others receive the benefits. The principle of justice also requires researchers to demonstrate fairness in the selection of participants and not exploit those who are vulnerable because of availability, compromised position, or manipulability. It also requires that the research and its findings do not create or perpetuate social inequality.

What does this mean for researchers? First, justice goes beyond the requirement to protect participants

from harm. Research demonstrates justice by focusing upon the welfare of participants and the public interest. It would be unjust, for example, if research benefited organisations while the individual employees who bore the burden of research, and the wider society who either directly or indirectly funded the research (via the salaries of the university researchers or direct government grants) received no benefit. Yet an analysis of articles published in the Academy of Management's journals between 1958 and 2000 (Walsh, Weber & Margolis, 2003) found only 19 per cent of articles included reference to some aspect of welfare, down from the 35 per cent of articles in 1978. Not only did citation analysis show studies of organisational performance received more citations than studies of employee welfare, but fewer than two per cent of the studies

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considered the effect of organisational practices outside the boundaries of the firm. Furthermore, most research involved some form of economic framing, or paid little attention to the firm's role in society. At a simple level this does not

appear just, and appears to suggest that the benefits of much business research, at least, may go to organisations, whilst the burdens are borne by employees and the public purse.

Similarly, Thornton (2008) argued that much research in the social sciences has become 'commodified', often for the benefit of end users who see some advantage in co-operating, and/or who are able to pay for the services. There is often a patron/client relationship between those who control access to participants (the patrons) and researchers (the client). Research tends to be undertaken in areas that can provide funding. Projects, and the reputation of scholars, now rise or fall on their ability to attract large grants, rather than projects' capacity to act as a social good.

Furthermore, unlike medical research, business and other non-medical research is often not designed to lead to immediate, specific, or large benefits to either individuals or society, or to the prevention of harm. Researchers and their employing organisations, research participants and their employing organisations, and society all have a stake in research outcomes, and these stakes are based upon different, and potentially competing, interests (Germeroth, 1994). The topics chosen for research reflect the interests of

the stakeholders, and potentially reflect their power differences. Academic researchers generally have an interest in seeking and transmitting new knowledge, and in advancing their careers. Their universities have an interest in attracting research income and increasing research output. Potential participants may be most interested in issues related to their welfare at the individual, group, or organisational level. Organisations are normally interested in improving performance. The interests of the wider society are complex, but are at times transmitted through government funding priorities. Within this context it is difficult to ensure a balance of burdens and benefits.

Moreover, business researchers' knowledge-seeking can normally only be undertaken with the co-operation and support of employing organisations. Most business research is based on field studies (Scandura & Williams, 2000), and use participants from a single organisation (Ostroff & Harrison, 1999). This organisational support is only likely to be forthcoming if there is a demonstrable benefit to the organisation. Employees may therefore be asked to provide information for, or to commit time or energy to, a research project they would not otherwise wish to be involved in. This is especially so when the relationships are a result of a formal collaboration between universities and industry. Universities have a financial and public relations interest in obtaining sponsored or collaborative research. They see industry as a source of research funds, and actively encourage collaboration by rewarding researchers for industry-funded or collaborative grants. A positive view is that new problems are identified, researchers are intellectually stimulated, publications are increased, and student education is enhanced – and earnings are generated for university research. A negative view is that such relationships narrow the range of research to topics supported by particular organisations, and researchers lose their independence, focussing on short-term or commercially profitable products that promote specific interests of industry rather than the interests of individuals or society (Rule & Shamoo, 2001; Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001). Buchanan and Bryman (2009) argue that this support for managerial agendas causes researchers to become 'servants of power'.

It needs to be asked, then, if there is justice in the chosen topics and methodology of much non-medical research. Although business research was mentioned above, another potential area of concern relates to the increasing use of students (tertiary, secondary,

and primary), often in class time, as research participants. Students are vulnerable because of availability, compromised position, and manipulability. There is often no benefit to them for participation – although some are concerned that there may be negative consequences for nonparticipation, despite assurances to the contrary. Is it fair and just that they are required to give up class time for a teaching staff member's research project?

As researchers, we need to keep in mind the principle of justice, and apply it to our own research efforts. This is not something which can be driven by HRECs, but, rather, needs to come from the engagement of researchers when selecting topics for knowledge-seeking. Bamber and Sappey (2007) argue that the requirement that HREC approval be received for research in organisations, and that such approval is only given if the organisation formally consents to the research, prevents much useful work in industrial sociology. Take away the requirement for review, they suggest, and you take away the requirement for organisational consent. Researchers may therefore go into organisations anonymously, collect data, and knowledge will be advanced. Such an approach sidesteps the ethical issue of justice, and also potentially breaches the second major principle of ethical research, beneficence.

Beneficence

The second ethical principle, beneficence, rests on a utilitarian framework which views actions as acceptable if they minimise risks of harm and maximise possible benefits. The *National Statement* (NH&MRC, 2007) specifies 'Researchers exercise beneficence in several ways: in assessing and taking account of the risks of harm and the potential benefits of research to participants and to the wider community; in being sensitive to the welfare and interests of people involved in their research; and in reflecting on the social and cultural implications of their work' (p. 11). 'Where there are no likely benefits to participants, the risk to participants should be lower than would be ethically acceptable where there are such likely benefits' (p. 13).

Non-medical researchers, as well as medical researchers, thus need to assess the probability and magnitude of benefits and harm, and ensure they anticipate and confront harms such as embarrassment, stress, guilt, devaluation of worth, ostracism, loss of promotion or career opportunity, damage to relationships, and legal risk (Levine, 1986; NH&MRC,

2007). As non-medical research is normally designed to benefit stakeholders other than the participants - in the case of business research benefit is usually to the researcher or organisation commissioning the research - then no harm should be done to participants. A cognitive shift is required to one of explicit consideration, and at times the involvement of researchers in follow-ups to resolve any issues raised during the research process (Wright & Wright, 1999). In organisational research, for example, researchers need to ask if the publication of findings may embarrass or hurt the career of participants, and studies of workplace health may show need for intervention. An extreme example is an observational study of uranium miners in the US which found an association between exposure to radon in mine air and lung cancers, and did not warn participants about the dangers of the conditions in which they were working (Panikkar & Brugge, 2007). When the miners sought compensation the court determined the research was 'observational' not 'experimental', and the Nuremberg Code applied only to experimental studies. Therefore 'it was neither necessary nor proper ... to advise the miners voluntarily appearing for examinations of potential hazards in uranium mines...' (ACHRE 1997, cited in Panikkar & Brugge, 2007 p. 129). This judgement shows how problems may occur if ethical standards are applied only to medical research.

Assessing benefits and harm is not always easy, though. Some performance art, for example, may be designed to be extremely confronting for the audience - assessing the 'risks' of such work in a formal fashion is difficult, and if there was no possibility of 'harm' then the art would lose its purpose. (Author's note: I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight).

Additionally, the well-being of individuals, groups, and communities not directly involved in the research needs to be considered. These people also require beneficence, as they may be affected by research findings and publication, such as when research reports negative information relating to an identifiable person, or provides an interpretation which a group or community may find distressing or offensive, or finds a conditions which suggest there is a risk of harm to others. This may occur from research, for example, which highlights the prevalence of violence or child abuse in particular communities, or from the uranium worker research mentioned above which failed to disclose the potential risk of the mines to those living around them (Panikkar & Brugge, 2007).

Respect for persons

The third core ethical principle, respect for persons, is demonstrated by viewing individuals as autonomous agents, and protecting those with diminished autonomy. The *National Statement* (NH&MRC, 2007) 'requires having due regard for the welfare, beliefs, perceptions, customs and cultural heritage, both individual and collective, of those involved in the research ... researchers and their organisations should respect the privacy, confidentiality and cultural sensitivities of the participants and, where relevant, of their communities ... Respect ... involves giving due scope ... to the capacity of human beings to make their own decisions' (p. 13). This principle rests on the deontological framework which operates from the foundation that individuals have rights - such as for autonomy and privacy - and to violate these causes a wrong. People can be wronged through the violation of their self-determination when they are treated as the means to someone else's ends even if they are not physically harmed (Macklin, 1999).

An example of how this principle is applied by a professional body is the *Academy of Management's Code of Ethical Conduct* (2002) which states 'It is the duty of Academy members to preserve and protect the privacy, dignity, well-being and freedom of research participants. This duty requires ... informed consent from all participants... Informed consent means explaining to potential participants the purposes and nature of the research so they can freely choose whether or not to become involved. Such explanations include warning of possible harm and providing explicit opportunities to refuse or participate and to terminate participation at any time. Because students and employees are particularly subject to possible coercion, even when unintended, special care must be taken in obtaining their informed consent...' (p. 292).

Despite this, there has been little discussion in the business research literature on the nature of this 'special care', and upon how researchers can ensure voluntariness, and informed consent. Many work situations lack the contractual individualism necessary for informed consent because organisations may strongly support a research project, or because the organisational culture requires acquiescence to desires expressed by management. Similarly, practical issues mean many researchers in business and other social science areas still wish to recruit participants from their networks of friends or contacts with whom they have developed personal or business relationships.

This also influences the selection of research topic and research design, and the presentation of findings (Buchanan and Bryman, 2009).

In addition, research in some countries involves participation by people for whom human rights issues such as autonomy and informed consent are irrelevant to social and cultural norms (Macklin, 1999). They thus have no concept of any rights they may have regarding participation in research, even when they are told that participation is voluntary. Moreover, increasing use of open-ended qualitative research means that it is often impossible for participants to give informed consent to the use of their contribution, as they do not know in advance what themes may emerge, or how their words will be interpreted (Richardson & Godfrey, 2003). Participants may also introduce topics they did not intend to introduce, or the supportive climate of an interview may lead them to reveal details they did not intend to reveal. We need to reflect upon these issues, and engage in discussions about possible conflicts between ensuring the autonomy of individuals and groups and the desire to publish thorough and accurate research. We also need to reflect upon the rights of communities, and our responsibilities to them.

Conflicts of interest

Any research which involves groups or collectivities has the potential for conflict between this group's desires, such as not to have negative findings published, and the researchers' interest in undertaking a research project and accurately transmitting the findings (Rule & Shamoo, 2001). Findings may be suppressed within a group or organisation, or ignored by key stakeholders. Additionally, pressure may be placed upon researchers to interpret material in a particular manner. This possibility is heightened in those situations where contractual agreements require the group or organisation to 'sign off' on any publication coming out of collaboration.

Academic researchers can also find themselves with an internal conflict of interest. It occurs when a person's 'judgment regarding the primary interest (such as a ... [participant's] welfare or the validity of research) tends to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest, such as financial gain' (Thompson, 1993, p. 573). Such a conflict may affect a researcher's judgment or behaviour. Such conflicts include investigators holding collaborative or consulting agreements with the group or organisation sponsoring the research, employment of one or more of the researchers by the organisation

under study, or the researcher's professional interest in ensuring a strong research publication record. However, there are also intrinsic conflicts of interest related to a researcher's interest in conducting noteworthy studies which are published in prestigious journals. These are needed to for career advancement and a reputation in the area (Sollitto *et al.*, 2003). Thus one US Institutional Review Board insists that participants in studies should be given the warning 'All investigators and institutions have an 'intrinsic' conflict of interest, since professional advancement for physicians and scientists (such as promotion and reputation) depends in part on successfully enrolling patients like you into studies such as this one' (cited in Sollitto *et al.*, 2003 p. 89).

Some conflicts, such as those resting on collaborative financial agreements, are normally recognised and disclosed to participants, although, again, the topic has failed to receive the same space in non-medical research as it has in medical research. However, the effect of other conflicts, such as the pressure exerted on universities to obtain external funding, and the subsequent pressure placed on investigators to obtain grants and undertake sponsored and collaborative research, are seldom recognised or discussed as ethical issues, particularly in non-medical areas, although they may be raised using other critical frameworks (e.g., Thornton, 2008). In contrast, the effect of research sponsorship on the shaping of research is frequently discussed in the medical literature and the media, and prominence is given to the potential bias in research topics or programs (see, for example, Tereskerz, Hamric, Guterbock & Moreno, 2009 for a study of the compromises made in medical research as a result of industry sponsorship). Those of us who research in non-medical areas should also reflect on this problem.

Is there a role for HRECs?

The section above summarised the major principles which are common to most discussions of ethics in research among humans (Macfarlane, 2009). This section will consider the realities for many researchers and the roles of HRECs and other ethical review bodies in non-medical research.

The roles of researchers

In writing about business and organisational research, Kakabadse, Kakabadse and Kouzmin (2002, p. 105) suggest it aims to advance and shape 'organisational

objectives, culture, individuals and societies as it provides new insights that inform premises upon which decisions and judgements are based'. This needs to be done within the reality of academic life – increased pressure to submit applications for and receive competitive grants and publish in top-tier journals, reduced administrative support, and increased student-staff ratios. Chief investigators are specialists in a subject area who often supervise several research projects in addition to their higher degree by research students, and are under increasing pressure to 'do more with less'. An increasing number of research students have undertaken their undergraduate degrees outside Australia and have not had the training in research ethics that is part of most Australian undergraduate or honours degrees. And the majority of research which is submitted to University HRECs appears on applications written by research students or research assistants, rather than Chief Investigators. What follows will be written in this context.

It is easy to see 'ethical' in the research context as 'being truthful and doing no physical harm', but this directs attention away from issues of participant, group, and community rights.

The role of HRECs

Three arguments could be used as a rationale for not submitting non-medical research to HREC or other form of external review:

Argument 1: Non-medical research should not undergo ethical review as there are no ethical issues and no risk of harm to participants or others.

Argument 2: Non-medical research should not undergo ethical review as there are ethical issues, but these do not involve risk of harm to participants or others.

Argument 3: Non-medical research should not undergo ethical review as there are ethical issues that may involve risk to participants or others, but these are fully understood by researchers and always addressed by them.

The previous discussion showed both that there are ethical issues associated with non-medical research, and that these may involve risk of harm to participants or others. This leaves Argument 3 – that researchers fully understand the ethical issues and always address them in their research.

The topic of research ethics is difficult, and the ethical principles sometimes seem contradictory. For example, the issue of individual rights may conflict

with potential benefits to a larger group of people. As discussed above, it is more than giving accurate attribution for research, and not fabricating research findings. It is easy to see 'ethical' in the research context as 'being truthful and doing no physical harm', but this directs attention away from issues of participant, group, and community rights. Additionally, harm is difficult to predict (Richardson & Godfrey, 2003). It requires understanding of participant sensibilities, knowledge of the context of their current situation, and appreciation of future possibilities. Busy researchers, no matter how experienced, seldom have the time or other resources to gather the data necessary to predict all possible outcomes of the collection and publication of particular data. Nor do they have the knowledge to anticipate outcomes. They are specialists in their technical area,

rather than specialists in research ethics, and their knowledge of possibilities is limited by the number of research projects they have been involved in as an investigator, consultant, reviewer or advisor. Thus one study found almost a

quarter of experienced marketing researchers did not identify any of the ethical issues in a series of research cases (Sparks & Hunt, 1998). The role in projects of Chief Investigator is also often that of supervisor, with research students or research assistants completing much of the day-to-day work. Research students – who seem to undertake the bulk of research in many universities – are even less likely to have the necessary knowledge or skills, particularly if their previous education has occurred in a country that does not use the ethical framework used in the West (Davis, 2003).

Nor can researchers relinquish their professional responsibility to organisational representatives. One study found human resources (HR) professionals, who often act as gatekeepers to research in organisations, were less sensitive to issues surrounding consent and potential risk to participants than were members of Human Ethics Institutional Review Boards (Ilgen & Bell, 2001). The HR managers also believed employees were more likely to react negatively to the organisation if given all information needed for informed consent.

It seems, then, that at least in business, researchers may not have a full understanding of all the ethical issues involved in their research, and decisions regarding the ethics of a research project cannot be

handed over to gatekeepers in the organisations in which the research is to take place. This seems to lead to three options. The first is that researchers individually develop a deep expertise in research ethics, as well as in their technical area. Second, they could use the expertise of others. Alternatively, they could both develop their own sensitivity and use the expertise of others. The latter is my preferred option.

I view the role of HRECs and other institutional review bodies as technical experts in the ethics of research. I see them in a similar way to how I view technical experts in statistics or other areas – an invaluable resource for ‘adding value’. The role of HRECs should not be framed as an issue of diminished researcher autonomy. Rather, HRECs should be viewed as one component of the structures and processes which enable and ensure universities conduct high quality, ethical research. HRECs have expertise from their membership, which includes experienced researchers; from their experience in applying the *National Statement*; and from their familiarity with wider issues related to ethics in many kinds of research. This is an invaluable resource for busy researchers. And not only does it help to have an independent third party – in this case the HREC – review a research proposal. In many cases, the act of formalising research ideas for production of an HREC application can sensitise a researcher to other issues in the research.

However, the ‘resource-based’ view of HRECs cannot be achieved without the engagement of researchers, or the assumption by researchers of personal responsibility for their work. ‘Ethical research’ is not something ‘stamped’ on research by a HREC or other review of the research summary and documentation. Rather, it involves consideration of the principles of ethical research at the research proposal stage. It requires researchers to ask questions such as ‘What are the benefits to society of my research?’, ‘Is my project biased toward providing an advantage for particular individuals or groups – and, if so, how can I balance that?’, ‘How much has my research proposal been framed by the requirement to obtain funding, rather than the needs of individuals, groups and society?’, ‘How can I ensure that participants know exactly what we are doing in this project, and the possible consequences for them?’, ‘How can I obtain fully informed consent?’, ‘How can I make sure I am not taking advantage of a participant group who are vulnerable because of a power differential (my students, friends, colleagues, employees...)?’, ‘How can I mentor, supervise and train the research

students and assistants involved in the research?’, ‘How can I ensure my research findings are shared with participants?’, ‘How can I ensure that research participation is a positive experience for participants?’, ‘What are the consequences for others who are not directly involved in the research – will anyone be negatively affected by my data collection or publication of my research findings?’, ‘Do participants receive appropriate recognition for the time and energy they spend on the project?’. These questions cannot all be addressed by an external ethical review.

In some ways it is unfortunate that Australia’s *National Statement* has evolved from an earlier version that related only to medical research. Although since 1985 the *National Statement* has been applied to non-medical research, it was specifically extended only in 1999. Even then, it was an extension, rather than a complete re-thinking. The latest version, although intentionally less medical in its language and presentation, still fails to resonate with many non-medical researchers, who understandably see it as a remnant of the pre-1999 medical *National Statement*. Some of that hang-over comes in the ‘Call for Papers’ for this article, which was explicit in suggesting ethical requirements are an ‘imposition’ when applied to non-medical research. It would be a pity if their potential for facilitating the engagement of researchers in ethical issues, better and more ethical research, and better outcomes for participants, were lost in negative framing such as this.

So if I could wave a magic wand I would wish for four things. The first is greater engagement by non-medical researchers in the ethical issues related to research in their area. There are such issues, and they are not just the responsibility of review bodies. The second is greater personal responsibility by senior researchers for the ethical development of their students – it is not something to be left to review bodies, or faculty or university training programs. The third is the use of HRECs and other human ethics review bodies as a resource. As researchers, we need to engage them in conversations about issues associated with our research prior to submitting an application. We need to let them know if we find the review process unhelpful, and what can be improved (and thank them when it has resulted in better designed research!). The fourth is that review committees and researchers need to work together to ensure research processes that engage participants so they will respond and regard university research positively. We want a community which trusts university

researchers to do important work. We cannot afford a community backlash to ill-presented or poorly developed research that does not benefit participants or others, or overlooks individual or group rights.

The most recent changes to the *National Statement* (NH&MRC, 2007) allow for alternative review of some low risk research, exemption from review of some negligible risk research, and single institutional review of multi-centre research. These innovations should lessen the frustration of some researchers who in the past have been faced with delays in research approval after HREC submission. And I admit that when it comes to ethical reviews HRECs are still learning. They are continually challenged by new research topics, disciplines, and methodologies (such as in performance-based drama), and by the need to have review processes that are swift as well as thorough. They are also challenged by membership resources spread thin, and by the need for a membership that fully reflects, and utilises, the research strengths of their institution and the interests of the wider community. We as researchers can do a lot to facilitate and improve the review process. We can engage in ethical issues, and show this engagement in our applications for institutional ethical approval. We can mentor our research students and junior researchers in the ethical issues related to our disciplines, and ensure their developing understanding is reflected in the applications they may submit on our behalf. We can use HRECs as 'sounding boards' for ethical issues related to our research areas. And, finally, we can improve ethical review in our institution by volunteering to be a member of its HREC or involved in the other processes responsible for ethical review of research. Improvement of ethical review processes is in our hands.

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