Research Ethics, some general principles

1. The primary responsibility for the ethical conduct of research lies with the researcher. The researcher should consider their project design against standard ethical guidelines for the conduct of research (see below for links to relevant documents), in particular the Declaration of Helsinki http://www.wma.net/en/20activities/10ethics/10helsinki

2. It is useful to think of research in terms of ends and means; that is in terms of the goal of the research, and the methods to be employed to achieve that goal(s). So two obvious questions to ask are: (a) is the goal of the research an ethically sound one? And (b) are the methods to be employed to attain that goal ethically sound?

3. It is important to recognise that even if the goals of the research are ethically sound, it does not follow from this that the research is ethically sound too. The research is only ethically sound if the methods employed are. So even if a research project could generate very important findings which might be employed to benefit thousands of people, if the methods proposed to generate those findings were not ethically sound, the research could not be ethically approved.

4. Normally, in healthcare settings, the goal of the research would typically be the generation of new knowledge. But in student research it is recognised that part of the value of the research process lies in its educative value, in training new researchers. So generation of new knowledge is not a strict requirement for ethical approval of student research. However, it should be stressed that the same ethical principles which constrain healthcare research generally also apply to student research. So the methods employed to attain research goals in student and non-student research must be equally ethically sound.

5. Having made these general points in paras 1-4, some key ethical principles in the conduct of research involving human subjects can be drawn attention to. These are principles of informed consent, confidentiality, protection of the dignity of the research subject, nonmaleficence, coercion and privacy.

5.1 Informed consent. Normally, the informed consent of the research subject is a requirement of ethically sound research. The subject should be informed of the nature and duration of the research in clear terms. Also, the subject should be made aware that they can opt not to continue to participate in the research at any time.

5.2 Confidentiality. Normally, information gathered about a research subject should be protected, for example by anonymisation or other strategies which obstruct the identification of subjects. Information about subjects which is stored electronically should be protected too. Subjects should be made aware of the limits of these protective strategies in keeping with the terms of the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act.

5.3 Dignity. Although a rather vague concept, researchers should be sensitive to preserve the dignity of the research subject/participant and not to employ methods which may embarrass or compromise the dignity of the subject/participant. One way of failing to respect the dignity of a subject/participant is if one uses the research subject simply as a means to one's own ends as a researcher.

5.4 Nonmaleficence. Participation in research should not normally harm the subject/participant or compromise their interests.

5.5 Coercion. For consent to participate in research to be ethically sound any possibility that the consent is result of coercion must be excluded. The presence of coercion invalidates the consent of the subject.

5.6 Privacy. Research methods should not normally violate the privacy of subjects. Be sensitive to where people might reasonably expect to have their behaviour observed, or not., and recorded for research purposes.

Useful resources

The above guidelines are minimal of course, and qualified. For more detailed guidance the following links provide useful information.

- The World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki https://www.wma.net/what-we-do/medical-ethics/declaration-of-helsinki/
- Health Research Authority https://www.hra.nhs.uk/planning-and-improving-research/policies-standards-legislation/governance-arrangement-research-ethics-committees/
- The British Psychological Society www.bps.org.uk
- The British Sociological Association http://www.britsoc.co.uk
- The General Medical Council (Research Guidance) https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/good-practice-in-research

For more general reading on research ethics, see, e.g. Foster C. (2001) *The ethics of medical research on humans*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

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