February 1, 2008. Excerpt from an interview with a former Research Ethics Committee chair.

“The most important thing for the success of the [Research Ethics Committee is that it] is seen as a respected agency within the institution […] If the perception of the [Research Ethics Committee] is that it is attempting to do a good thing for [the] institution, then the [people working at] the institution will help […] If [these people] see something that does not look quite proper in the conduct of research, they will call the [Research Ethics Committee] and say: 'I think there is a problem with professor so and so's research and I would like you to look into this.' If, on the other hand, [the committee is] seen […] as a police organization, then people will avoid [it]. [That is what happens when an] oversight agency develops a reputation of acting in a punitive way; not placing the highest priority on the interests of the regulated.

When I was chair of the [Research Ethics Committee], at one time I let everyone know, [that if you have] a complaint about research: bring it to me, I will attend to it immediately. [There was a] case where one of our residents called me [with a complaint about the research of one of our professors.] The two of us went together and in a courteous way I learned that what the resident had reported to me was true. I said to [the professor]: you came here from another institution and this is your first year here and perhaps this was acceptable behavior at the other institution, but it's not here and I don't expect to ever hear of that you've done any such thing again. No reporting, no headlines, no nothing, very quietly.
Now, regulatory agencies despise that: how can … you go out and, person to person, resolve the problem without creating a record? And it’s because of their insistence on documentation that the possibilities for this sort of collegial problem solving are disappearing … I reported that case and two other cases [in a publication], with all the names changed, and said: Here is how we’re handling this at the university level and if you ever require to bureaucratize this, [to] document and report it, you will destroy this. You will dry up … the informal monitoring system of the research environment and it will cost you millions and millions of dollars to replace this with hired monitors … But what we have now costs us nothing.”