Ethics in action: Approving and improving medical research with human subjects

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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.”