The challenges of an ethics application: The novice researcher’s perspective

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An ethics clearance is a necessary part of any research project and for the novice researcher an essential part of the learning progression. Research involving humans requires ethical clearance to ensure that it meets the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) standards (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2010).

Developing a clear understanding of what is involved with the submission of an ethics application early in the development of the project proposal is essential in order to streamline the application process.

The introduction of the Australian national ethics application form (NEAF) aims to simplify the process of applying for ethics approval (Human Research Ethics Handbook, 2008) by assisting Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) to assess proposals consistently and efficiently. Even so, research requiring ethics approval can be a challenge to the novice researcher.

Below are some useful guidelines that will help the novice researcher develop a successful ethics application.

1. The novice researcher should consult the necessary guidelines and the ethics committee early in the process and address ethical criteria during the initial design of a research project. This will help prevent the novice researcher falling into common pitfalls and reduce the need for revision in later stages.

2. It is advisable to consult with more experienced researchers and ethics advisors to develop knowledge and awareness of language and processes required to make a successful application. Reviewing successful ethics applications for projects using similar methodology will also assist with developing an understanding of what a successful ethical application entails. This is particularly important if the research involves issues that are considered ethically sensitive.

3. It is important to understand that the membership of the HREC is often diverse, so all applications must be written to enable understanding by people from a range of backgrounds. HREC membership may include health professionals, ministers of religion or persons of similar standing from within the community, lay persons and at least one lawyer (Taylor, Kemode, & Roberts, 2007). The novice researcher needs to reflect on terminology used to ensure that the intent and process of the research is clear and the application addresses the concerns of the committee.

4. The ethics coordinator should be consulted on the proposed site for the research to be conducted. This will ensure specific requirements related to that particular ethics committee can be addressed prior to final submission. Understanding the site’s requirements can often reduce the number of corrections needed and increase chances of approval on first round. It can streamline the application process and prevent significant time delays in commencing recruitment and data collection. This is particularly important for the novice researcher who is a PhD student meeting institutional demands or possible funding timeframes placed on them for completion.

5. Ethics applications involving onsite recruitment for survey participants or interview subjects often require a letter of support and authorisation to recruit in that area by senior management of the location, such as a health care institution. While there is no set way to complete this process, obtaining support at the lower levels or ward level then moving upward from nurse unit managers to directors of the area is a good way to gain confidence in presenting the study while also gaining the support of those who may ultimately end up being the main recruiters of participants.

The process of ethical approval is a steep learning curve for the novice researcher, however valuable skills are learnt during this time and it is very rewarding once approval is granted. It can be both time-consuming and challenging, but these skills are transferable to writing grant applications, ethics and research reports and for future research projects. Addressing the challenges of the ethics application will assist the novice researcher to gain confidence and develop writing skills to enhance their research career.

References