Research Ethics Committees a law unto themselves?

Recent views have accused RECs as similar to all political organizations, prone to corruption, political ambition and sociological dynamics (Edwards 2011). As a result committee’s can be inconsistent in their decision-making and subject to requiring unnecessary fussy extras before being happy with a proposal, which can result in extra costs and delays. There has even been evidence to suggest that patients have died because of the delays researchers have experienced during their fraught battles to get their research approved (Goldace 2011). Patients have also been harmed by the seemingly unreasonable insistence of RECs in getting written consent from relatives in drug trials, even though the treatments were exactly what the unconscious patients would have received in normal practice (Goldace 2011). The truth of any lack of humanitarianism or irrationality by RECs is difficult to gauge particularly as there are no set of values or standards in which to judge a committees’ decisions or practice. However inconsistency between committees remain inevitable because any discussions do not take place in a vacuum, group dynamics are predominantly involved and there may be hidden power struggles and conflicting interests between members.

The scientific scrutiny of research methodologies by RECs continues to predominate and seems to be a perennial complaint from researchers. It can be undeniable that weak science is unethical since it will not maximise possible benefits from the research and if it is unlikely to yield useful knowledge then it is a waste of resources. In effect weak science in itself can also mislead and harm people. However, once research has been sanctioned by a recognized body specifically competent to review the science as methodologically sound, then it is perhaps unreasonable for another body to further question this as a RECs opinion cannot be inherently better than anyone else on such matters. Unfortunately the issue remains that some peer reviews can be sketchy and RECs can be seduced by the fact that research students are known to submit weak proposals, presumably in cases where they do not wish to trouble their busy academic supervisors for advice. A good REC chair will normally guide the behavior expected of REC members to assess the social benefits of research and make sure that the focus remains only on ensuring that an independent expert review has occurred. The key factor behind all RECs is the quality of the chairs leadership and ability to obtain a reasonable and fair consensus of opinion.

It is clear that some RECs cannot be complacent and need to be more empathetic with what it is like to be in the research proposers chair fielding questions from a large number of seemingly eminent people. In return researchers also need to avoid being defensive and understand that if they do not explain things fully then others may not understand. Furthermore chief investigators act from invested interests and often stand to benefit personally from their research in terms of career advancement, personable acclaim or even financial gain and as a result their enthusiasm for research could easily cloud the interests of science.

RECs invariably will be accused of idiosyncrasy and inconsistency as ethics is not that simple; if it were then there would be no need for committees in the first place. Despite difficulties there are attempts to standardise practices through recent publishing of guidelines and encouraging members to attend regular training and share in ethical debates with other
committees. Meanwhile researchers should be wise in considering which REC they want to submit their proposals to and not ignore their right to appeal or complain to NRES REC managers.

References
