The Demise of the Ethics Committee

The number of applications being reviewed by NHS ethics committees from January 2009 onwards has reduced nationally. This fall has been attributed mainly to the recent changes in the funding arrangements for R&D and the introduction of the new Research Networks. Additionally, the impact of Governance Arrangements for Research Ethics Committees (GAfREC 2) has had a big influence on diminishing the workload of committees as there is now no requirement for research undertaken on NHS staff and on NHS premises to be reviewed by an NHS Research Ethics Committee (REC). These changes have led to the commissioning of Options Appraisal in line with NRES Management of Change Guidance for the Closure or Merger of Research Ethics Committees where measures are now being taken to review capacity against demand and consider closures and mergers of RECs within the West Midlands. If there are further closures of committees this could have a serious impact on researchers who subsequently in seeking out an available committee may have to travel further to defend their proposals. Researchers may also find themselves waiting in a queue to apply to the next accessible committee as the number of applications a committee reviews at each meeting can vary and be capped, with RECs normally reviewing around six applications per meeting and no more than eight.

Research is a core part of the NHS and other care services and it enables such services to improve the current and future health and well-being of the people they serve. One wonders if the cutting down further of committees, while possibly more cost effective, will support NHS research or promote public confidence in any governance arrangements ability to fully protect the safety and dignity of research participants. Ethics committees historically arose in response to a clinical need for a formal mechanism to address some of the value conflicts and uncertainties that arose in the NHS. In today’s apparent lack of morals and ethical virtues witnessed by the scandals of the Francis Report it is worrying that one of the NHS’s mechanisms for ethical scrutiny are possibly being cut back.