From my point of view

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Abstract

I am a Research Assistant currently working on an impact evaluation project with the Chief Investigator (Ann Saxon) in the Centre for Health and Social Care Improvement (CHSCI). Having recently compiled and submitted ethics applications for an NHS service evaluation, I felt that it may be useful to fellow researchers for me to report on some of the difficulties, developments and standard procedures we have observed during our quest for ethical approval. In this article the author will suggest that ethnography allows

Key words: NHS, care closer to home,

Accepted for Publication - May 2009

Background

I am a Research Assistant currently working on an impact evaluation project with the Chief Investigator (Ann Saxon) in the Centre for Health and Social Care Improvement (CHSCI). Having recently compiled and submitted ethics applications for an NHS service evaluation, I felt that it may be useful to fellow researchers for me to report on some of the difficulties, developments and standard procedures we have observed during our quest for ethical approval.

All research undertaken within the NHS requires both management approval from Research and Development offices at the site concerned and approval from an NHS Research Ethics Committee (REC). If a study is an audit or service evaluation, as with our study, then it would not usually be classified as research for the purposes of ethical review and would not therefore, require NHS REC approval (We found the following table (available here) to be very useful when deciding whether our study was Research, an Evaluation or Audit. However, if in our case your research proposal states the direct use of patients and users of the NHS then the R&D Peer Review Committee may request that you obtain NHS REC approval regardless of it being an evaluation. This is the case even if you are measuring non-clinical outcomes such as patient/staff satisfaction.

If your service evaluation is intended to take clinical measures then you will also need approval from other relevant medical committee’s. Researchers undertaking this type of research are currently and strongly urged to use The Integrated Research Application System (IRAS). This is an electronic form designed to enable you to enter your project information onto one system instead of duplicating information on separate application forms. It would also be useful to use this form if you have a large multi-site team as it provides a system of electronic authorisation as an alternative to ink signatures.

With deadlines looming this can be a real time saver as we’ve discovered! The IRAS form is currently available from the National Research Ethics Service website (NRES [available here]).
I would also highly recommend that you apply for the Research and Development Research Governance Training held on request at your local NHS Trust. This provides an excellent outline of your choice of either: basic, intermediate or advanced Department of Health National standard operating procedures for good ethical conduct. The facilitator will work through your methodology with you to identify and correct any weaknesses. This is professionally recognised training with a certificate made available upon completion.

A useful new development for individuals wishing to undertake an NHS audit or service evaluation is that NRES are due to launch a new review pathway specifically for evaluation studies. This will consist of a much shorter application and be put on a fast track system to the committee. This tool is expected to ‘go live’ near the end of 2009 and I’m sure it will be warmly welcomed!

The structure of the ethical review process is continually changing in response to technological advancement and increased functionality. Hence, it is necessary to enquire about the latest review procedures before embarking on any research project in order to ensure that your study is robust and ethically sound. A final note from me is that I have produced the following process diagram which I find useful to refer

I hope these brief insights will prove to be useful to those of you planning on undertaking research in the NHS requiring ethical approval and are wondering where you should make a start!