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## Research Ethics Committee

Once a month does not sound much, but when you see the ream of printed paper that arrives the week before, with a groaning thud on your desk, it feels like a more weighty commitment than it sounds. 'God', I mutter to myself. 'Has another month gone by that quickly?' For a moment I perceive my life ebbing away in monthly aliquots.

With a heavy heart, I take the papers home. With several evenings ahead of working through them, I decide to experiment a little: I try soft lighting and background music first. Soon though, I find myself singing along to music I have happily left in the background on countless other occasions. How about a comforting glass or two of wine instead? Hopeless, that one: halfway through the first paper I realise the evening has gone, and I have no memory of what I have read so far. I try a soft chair in the lounge next, scattering the papers on the ground around me in a relaxed manner. But then — minutes later — where was the other bit that went with this application, I ask myself? I am still resolving this question when the dog appears.

At least, having finally accepted the lesson of these experiments and sat at the kitchen table — and having now worked through that heavy pile of proposals — my sense of commitment is enhanced. Only a fool would subject himself to that kind of torment and then pass up on the one chance to show off that he really has read it all. So I go to the meeting gladly.

The offices where we meet are the local Primary Care Trust's HQ. It is a nice old stone mansion with a large flat-roofed extension in the best traditions of public service architectural despoilation. A lot of its office space now stands abandoned as posts whose provenance no-one understood have been pruned back in equal proportion to those of frontline staff. Balancing the books with balance, perhaps? Secretly, I fear those desks were really abandoned by folk who simply could not face another of those sandwiches with indeterminate brown ooze as are produced for lunch.

It is always a beautiful day, and the meeting room we use has only two tiny windows that can still be opened. Usually the radiator is on too, and for safety it has no local controls. A water cooler prevents dehydration however,

besides also giving us a faint sense that we might be rabbits in a hutch.

Don't let this sound downbeat though. The fun we have! Today there is a research proposal from a would-be researcher who has recently become a volunteer helper at a community gym. Now she wants to chat to the fatties who go there and write up her findings. Perhaps she will discover something about why they struggle with their weight.

Should we be concerned that she doesn't think she needs to ask their permission first? As she is a student, should we be concerned about her supervisor's savvy?

Someone else wants to inject joints with stuff that is not licensed for that use. He thinks it will be good but no-one told him this is not quite enough: he will need a clinical trials licence before his project can go anywhere.

Overall, we pass more than we block. Most of our time is spent helping researchers improve their applications to a point where they can be passed. Of course, some still treat us as trolls-under-the-bridge, an obstacle in the path of serious research: those are the studies we worry about most. Others are delightful, and for them, perhaps we try that little bit harder to help them succeed.

Today is the final meeting for our chair. For 10 years she has overseen our deliberations. She has kept it serious but fun too: volunteers can only be stressed so far before the cause pales and they withdraw. Her contribution will be missed, although of course the committee will persist.

As we present our card and our thanks, a ripple of anticipation goes round. Does it still exist, the parting gift of lore? A small wrapped box presented. Heavy enough in her hands? Could it be? No ...

Yes! Lucky girl! She got a glass paperweight! Cheers all round the room. We all leave still buzzing — again.