Research governance: assailing a paper mountain

Here is a personal view of the rigmarole I have been experiencing as a PhD student applying for local Research and Development (R&D) approval to conduct my relatively low-risk study. The very mention of ‘ethics’ and ‘R&D’ elicits sighs all round from the PhD office and this is not without good reason. I, for one, have found the application system complex, inconsistent and at times, rather discouraging.

Since 2008, an online Integrated Research Application System (IRAS) has been in operation for the purpose of seeking ethical approval nationally and facilitating local research governance approval. The creation of IRAS followed a Department of Health advisory group report calling for a streamlined ethics Department of Health advisory group without good reason. I, for one, have found all round from the PhD office and this is not there with a personal view of the rigmarole I the application system complex, mentioning ‘ethics’ and ‘R&D’ elicits sighs Development (R&D) approval to conduct have been experiencing as a PhD student have been in operation for the purpose of Research Application System (IRAS) has been in operation for the purpose of seeking ethical approval nationally and facilitating local research governance approval. The creation of IRAS followed a Department of Health advisory group report calling for a streamlined ethics system without good reason. I, for one, have found all round from the PhD office and this is not there with a personal view of the rigmarole I the application system complex, mentioning ‘ethics’ and ‘R&D’ elicits sighs

At the time of writing I had applied to three PCT R&D offices. There was nothing ‘integrated’ about this experience. Each office required at least 10 different documents to be emailed through, in a variety of formats (pdf, xml, three large envelopes filled with old-fashioned paper). I was also asked to provide documentation which was not listed on the checklist, such as a financial breakdown of study funding arrangements. Some emails bounced back due to attachment size. At this point I was climbing a mountain of paperwork, which might have honed my administrative skills, but did little for my academic development as a postgraduate researcher. One could say that I was on the receiving end of what Haggerty* coined the ‘ethics creep’. The unique skills required for negotiating the ethical complexities of researching health services were being substituted by cumbersome bureaucracy.

Yet, most importantly, I believe that the research governance process lacks the transparency of the national ethical review. Information about who makes the decision about R&D approval is not made available to the researcher, and it is unclear on what grounds a decision is reached. Indeed, I have been faced with an unfavourable decision which I believe is not consistent with the checks stipulated in the Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care. As justification, I was provided with an inaccurate statement of my study aims to support the decision of the office in question. There was no mention whether I could appeal.

My experience is not atypical and raises issues such as the lack of research governance consistency and transparency. There is a clear requirement for a greater balance in addressing the needs of the research process, as well as of those being researched. Impeding health services research through excessive bureaucracy cannot be in the public interest. Just one suggestion for improving the IRAS online system would be an integrated function for uploading attachments and thus submitting the same documents to all R&D offices at the push of a button. At a time of financial austerity, this would no doubt be a time-saving and therefore cost-cutting solution. Furthermore, the composition of the panel behind the R&D decision and the criteria they use for evaluating applications should be made explicit to the researcher. Behind such changes should lie the ultimate goal of removing the frustrating bureaucratic burden faced by health service researchers, while endeavouring to maintain the highest ethical standards throughout the research process.

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REFERENCES


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