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How can we get mentors and trainees talking about ethical challenges?

When it comes to research integrity, the international community often tends to focus on the incidence of research misconduct and the presumption that the remedy is to have more training in responsible conduct of research. Unfortunately, published evidence largely argues that these perceptions are demonstrably wrong. Specifically, training in courses and workshops is much less likely to be a factor in researcher behavior than what is observed in the context of the research environment (Whitbeck, 2001; Faden et al., 2002; Kalichman, 2014).

These research findings should not be surprising. Most of an academic or research career is defined by a researcher conducting research and working with research colleagues. The idea that a single course or workshop will somehow insulate a researcher from unethical or questionable behavior, or arm them with the skills to deal with such behavior would seem to be a hard case to make. That isn't to say that there is no value in such training, but the possible benefit is likely far less than what is conveyed by the research experience itself. With that in mind, the question is how, all things considered, can research mentors be encouraged to integrate ethical discussions and reflections into the context of the day-to-day research experience?

With this as a challenge, we have been testing several approaches at UC San Diego in California to move conversations about research ethics out of the classroom and into the research environment. With support from the US National Science Foundation, this project began with a 3-day conference comprised of ~20 leaders in the field of research ethics.

integrity (Plemmons and Kalichman, 2017). Our goal was to develop a curriculum for a workshop in participating faculty would acquire tools and resources to incorporate RCR conversations into the fabric research environment. Based on consensus from the conference participants, a curriculum was drafted, refined with input from experts and potential users, and finalized for pilot testing. Following two successful workshops for faculty at UC San Diego, the curriculum was rolled out for further testing nationally with interested faculty.

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Magical incantations and the tyranny of the template

Building the Conversation

This month's addition to the Building the Conversation series reflects upon how institutional template consent material can have odd results/ill suited/nonsensical consequences.



What do you mean you don't understand and it's a bit long? I carefully followed my institution's consent template.

It is widely accepted that human research ethics committees (HRECs) devote much of their time to the review of plain language statements or participant information and consent forms (PICFs). It should be noted that, unlike the US, Australia's human research ethics arrangements have not been enacted into law. Chapter 2.2 of the National Statement does identify some recommended components of a consent strategy, but the number and specificity of provisions are much less than those often demanded by Australian research ethics committees. Historically, this amount of attention may have been due to the fact that, without guiding experience, researchers devised their own PICFs, resulting in a possibly bewildering variety of structure, grammar and expression. In more recent decades, the focus of pharmaceutical sponsors on maximising disclosure has caused much of the increased length and detail.

Probably in response to this variety and the increasing time devoted to review and the often detailed and even pedantic correction, HRECs hit on the idea of providing templates or standard forms for researchers to follow. The likely purpose behind these initiatives was to reduce the variety of PICFs and so in turn reduce the time that committees spent on them, correcting spelling, grammar and adding information the committees saw as being key to informing potential participants. An implicit message in the provision of standard forms and templates was that if researchers used these forms, it was more likely that the forms, and the projects, would be approved.

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