



## LETTERS

## NHS STAFF AND RESEARCH

# Clinicians wanting to engage with research should join an ethics committee

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Maben and King discuss the opportunities and barriers for NHS staff wanting to take part in research.<sup>1</sup> One positive aspect of the prolonged process required to gain grant funding and necessary project approval is that it forces potential researchers to be explicit about what they want to do, how they plan to do it, and whether their results are likely to be useful. Although this painful process means that many clinicians do not have the time to conduct research, it also prevents poor research, which is very easy to propose and conduct. Major harm can be done when poorly designed research hits the headlines, so quality control is important.

But what should a clinician do if they appreciate the critical importance of research but do not have the time to design a study, go through the regulatory process, then conduct and disseminate the research themselves? They might consider contributing to the wider system of research quality control by joining a research ethics committee.

The Health Research Authority runs about 70 research ethics committees that review research spanning almost all areas of medicine, surgery, and increasingly the medical humanities. Although members are required to keep projects confidential, many find it fascinating to review research encompassing all

the different contexts, methodologies, and ingenious approaches to contemporary health challenges. Members are not expected to be experts in science, clinical medicine, or methodologies, but rather have enough common sense and interest to try to understand what a project is about and then assist the researcher in producing a high quality piece of work. Although the gatekeeper role is still important, the members of research ethics committees are increasingly encouraged to see their role as regulatory stewards,<sup>2</sup> helping those who can get the time and funding to produce the best possible research. This is a critical role that desperately needs the engagement of more clinicians.

Competing interests: I am chair of the NHS Hampshire A research ethics committee and of the Ministry of Defence research ethics committee (MODREC).

Full response at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/365/bmj.l4040/rr-0>.

1 Maben J, King A. Engaging NHS staff in research. *BMJ* 2019;365:l4040. 10.1136/bmj.l4040 31208964

2 Laurie GT, Dove ES, Ganguli-Mitra A, et al. Charting regulatory stewardship in health research: making the invisible visible. *Camb Q Healthc Ethics* 2018;27:333-47. 10.1017/S0963180117000664. 29509122

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