

Parallel Sessions A
A3 – Questioning Scholarly Communications

Thursday, September 19, Room D, 11.00

Protecting Human Research Subjects – What is an Acceptable Literature Search for a Medical Research Proposal?

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Medical research involving human subjects is strictly controlled. When a proposal for a research project is first submitted, it is standard practice for experts to assess it on ethical and scientific grounds before granting approval for the project to proceed. The researcher's proposal will be based in part on evidence obtained from a literature search, and the quality of that search can therefore have a bearing on the ethical and scientific validity of the research proposal.

In June 2001 a research volunteer at Johns Hopkins University died following controlled inhalation of a substance during a research project. The subsequent internal enquiry into this incident identified shortcomings in the literature search carried out by the principal investigator as a serious area of concern. Johns Hopkins University responded to these findings by requiring medical researchers to observe more stringent procedures when carrying out literature searches to support research proposals involving human subjects, so that the fullest possible risk assessment could be carried out before a proposal received approval.

This paper will discuss the question of what constitutes an acceptable standard of literature search in medical research proposals. It will review existing practices, examine the possible consequences of an inadequate literature search, and suggest ways in which librarians can help to establish, monitor, and raise search standards.