

Health research ethics committee

Points to consider

- Are HREC members familiar with the general principles of qualitative research and how these may differ from the principles on which quantitative studies are based?
- Even though qualitative research proposals commonly do not include sets of specific hypotheses to be tested, they should include a set of clearly set out research questions or research objectives. Have these been included in the research proposal under review?
- In general, informed consent should be obtained in writing. However, there are legitimate instances when consent is not possible, or when it may need to be verbal rather than written. Research proposals should state clearly how consent will be obtained and, where a waiver is requested or verbal consent only is to be obtained, a clear rationale and reasons justifying such a course of action should be provided. Have these criteria regarding consent been met?
- HREC members should recognise that while, in general, qualitative research is non-threatening and non-intrusive, it can still result in harm for the research participant. Power relationships between researcher and research participant should be acknowledged, along with the possibility of unanticipated consequences. Does the research proposal provide a clear account of how these unanticipated consequences will be dealt with if they do eventuate? Does the research proposal provide a clear account of appropriate strategies for supporting both the participant and the researcher when the research relationship ends?
- Ethics committees should be aware that ethical guidelines for qualitative research have been developed and published by a number of social science professional bodies. Do HREC members refer to these when conducting assessments of multidisciplinary research proposals, for example, sociological, anthropological and public health proposals?
- Are HREC members aware of the areas of difficulty in relation to ethical assessment of qualitative research proposals?
- Given the diversity and complexity of the range of qualitative methods, it is unlikely that any one member of an HREC will have the expertise to assess the range of methodological approaches likely to arise. Are ethics committee members aware that it is appropriate to consult experts on qualitative aspects of research proposals as needed?