

Research Ethics in the English Speaking Caribbean – the Role of the Biostatistician

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Ethics has a crucial role in the oversight of health research but insufficient attention is being paid to it in the English-Speaking Caribbean. This is a great cause for concern since these countries are increasingly being targeted as sites for clinical trials. Indeed, few English-Speaking Caribbean countries have critical facilities / supporting structures such as Research Ethics Committees (REC) or Institutional Review Boards (IRB). This is primarily due to a lack of awareness and the capacity to set up and manage these Committees/Boards. However, there have been efforts by the Caribbean Health Research Council (CHRC) and the Bioethics Society of the English Speaking Caribbean (BSEC) to rectify the situation.

Statisticians/epidemiologists/methodologists also have an important role to play and their membership on REC/IRB is critical. Indeed, one of the ethical requirements of research studies is scientific validity and Committees/Boards have to ensure that issues relating to design, sampling and analysis are adequately addressed.

In addition to their role on REC and IRB in ensuring that studies satisfy strict methodological criteria before receiving ethics approval as well as during monitoring (including the conduct of appropriate interim statistical analyses in Randomized Controlled Trials), statisticians and epidemiologists are bound to conduct their work in an ethical manner. For epidemiological studies, this includes ensuring that all participants give their informed consent, free of undue influence of persons in authority and financial inducements. In addition, all efforts should be made to minimize risks associated with the research while maximizing benefits. Other issues that must be addressed include maintaining confidentiality of the data collected and full disclosure of any conflicts of interest.

Matters relating to professionalism and the responsibilities of statisticians are clearly articulated in codes of conduct and adherence is mandatory. These usually relate to The Public Interest, Duty to Employers and Clients, Duty to the Profession and Professional Competence and Integrity.

The International Biometrics Society (IBS) and Regional Statistical Associations such as the Central America and Caribbean Region of the IBS have an important role to play in promoting/supporting research ethics in the English Speaking Caribbean. These contributions can be through capacity building efforts (including both pre-service and in-service training) and advocacy.