



NOTES FOR ETHICS COMMITTEES

Conflict of interest in research

Conflict of interest relates to when a person or organisation has multiple roles / duties / interests / responsibilities that could possibly influence the motivation of another individual or organisation.

Key points include:

- The many roles that one individual may have;
- The conflict may be related to researcher roles and or those of the organisation;
- Dependent relationships including power imbalances need to be considered;
- There may be a potential for conflict of interest, a perceived conflict of interest or an actual conflict of interest.

Whether the risk is possible or actual it must be mitigated. Two major concerns in conflict of interest include firstly compromising, through coercion, the wellbeing of research participants and secondly impacts on research integrity.

Conflict of interests can occur in many domains including:

- Financial (sponsorship, funding, financial interest in research outcomes);
- Emotional (power imbalances in which participants feel coerced into participating);
- Personal (personal gain from the research outcomes);
- Professional (undertaking research in your own organisation with your own clients).

Common examples seen in ethics applications where there is a *potential* conflict in some circumstances include:

- Testing of a commercial product for a company where the company is funding all research costs (and may control publication of findings);
- Exploration of patient experiences of illness or health care by health professionals (who may or may not have cared for the patients who may become participants);
- Using university students enrolled in a paper to demonstrate laboratory techniques on each other;
- A teacher undertaking an action research project in their own school.

All potential or actual conflicts of interest should be able to be identified and mitigated or managed in advance, through changes in the research design, especially participant recruitment, and the provision of information. Aim for:

- Transparency - explain the conflict and mitigate (within the ethics application and in the public documents including the Information Sheet);
- Good processes to maintain research integrity.

Bibliography

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