Strengthening Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and IRB Cooperation through the Establishment of Joint Working Groups on Ethical Issues
Marika W McAdam; Isolde Birdthistle, PhD
Marie Stopes International

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Problem Statement: One of the largest family planning NGOs in the world has provided sexual and reproductive healthcare for more than 30 years, setting standards and pioneering new approaches and innovations in some of the most challenging environments across the globe. Following the expansion of research programmes alongside service delivery, that NGO created an independent Ethics Review Committee (ERC) in 2010 to ensure that research protocols submitted to it comply with international ethical best practices and standards. In requiring research protocols to go through ethics review, tensions arose between the NGO whose researchers work to provide urgent service delivery timelines, and the ERC whose members may sometimes require significant changes to protocols before granting approval. In response, the ERC introduced an innovative way of strengthening collaboration between the NGO and the ERC while also providing guidance grounded both in international ethical standards, and practical on-the-ground realities of the research in the context of service delivery, through the introduction of three joint Working Groups in 2013.

Methods: The Working Groups comprised members of both the ERC, as well as members of the NGO’s International Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation team and staff from its International Programme Department. In this framework, two substantive Working Groups were created to produce guidelines on drafting protocols in accordance with international standards. One is mandated to advance community participation in research, and the other is tasked to consider the ethics of using mystery (simulated) clients in sexual and reproductive health research. The third Working Group developed an interactive electronic training module to strengthen the NGO’s research ethics understanding and build its capacity to submit ethically sound research protocols to the ERC.

Findings: Ultimately, joint ownership of the process increased uptake of the guidance that resulted. The collaborative approach gave NGO staff deeper understanding of the value of ethics review, and gave ERC members insight into the unique ethical challenges faced by a service-delivery NGO in different practical contexts. This poster will offer as an innovative best practice example, the formulation of joint researcher and IRB member Working Groups. Such joint Working Groups are an effective model to promote institutional buy-in through collaboration and cooperation, to ensure that ethical standards are grounded in practical on-the-ground research realities, and to mainstream ethical protection of human subjects in the development and delivery of research protocols.