Out with the Old, in with the New: Replacing an Outdated IRB Process with a New Electronic Software Management Tool
Anita E. Pascoe, MS, CIP; Shelby Moench
Intermountain Healthcare

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Problem Statement: Our institution’s IRB has been utilizing a “home grown” software tool to manage research applications. During the past two years, we started noticing frequent error messages, complaints from researchers regarding missing documents and non-intuitive processes, burdensome and time intensive application, and similar concerns adding complexity to the already challenging IRB review process. This made workflow management in the IRB office difficult. Our institution had, in addition to using the electronic system for submission and approval of applications, been utilizing a paper-based review model for IRB board meetings. Several committee members had started requesting an electronic process to be implemented. The cost and inefficiency of printing, copying, and shipping paper packets to IRB committee member became unsustainable. Moreover, our current system did not capture some of the data essential to tracking and generating important department reports. The decision was therefore made to purchase a new software management tool that could replace the outdated application management tool and the paper-based board review model.

Description of Research: We conducted a thorough review and evaluation of available software tools, selected a product, and trained the IRB staff on the new system. The implementation process took longer than expected due to compatibility issues between our institutional security systems and the new software. We decided to overlap the old with the new one until the new process was fully functioning. One of our main concerns was that our IRB committee members were used to paper-based reviews. We distributed an online questionnaire to learn more about committee members’ preferences for training related to the new process. We also instituted open office hours at two of our main facilities and established a generic email account for support requests from researchers. IRB staff members were trained to respond to inquiries, and one of our staff members was designated as the primary contact for calls related to the implementation. We worked with our corporate communications departments to relay information and updated to our research community throughout the process. IRB committee members were trained by a) group instruction following IRB meetings; b) 1:1 training sessions; and c) utilizing instruction manuals developed for this purpose. Following implementation, we surveyed staff, researchers, and committee members to solicit input on what was or was not working well. Staff members logged troubleshooting calls.

Next Steps: Ongoing monitoring has been implemented and will remain in place until 2015, then re-evaluated.