What is an Institutional Review Board (IRB)?
An IRB is a committee of scientists, community members, and advocates who review research involving human subjects to help protect the rights and welfare of the subjects involved.

Why do we need to use an IRB?
Federally funded research institutions rely on IRBs to review and monitor biomedical and behavioral research involving humans; it is standard practice in the field. Additionally, today many granting agencies and partner institutions such as public schools or universities require review of research involving human subjects in order to protect subjects’ rights and welfare.

Federal regulations protecting human subjects
IRBs exist to ensure that the following regulations are followed:
- Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46: Basic Health & Human Services (HHS) Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (also known as the Common Rule)
- The Belmont Report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects

If I’m just conducting an evaluation, not a research project, do I still need to go through an IRB?
The answer depends on your particular goals and what you intend to do with the results. HHS provides a helpful flowchart for deciding whether a project qualifies as research involving human subjects: http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/policy/checklists/decisioncharts.html

Should my institution form its’ own IRB?
This is truly an institutional decision and there are pros and cons; forming an in-house IRB allows for more control over the processing of applications. However, the process is very time intensive. In order to be federally recognized, institutions must register with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Are there other options?
Some institutions route proposals through an established university or for-profit IRB. This approach does not involve the time commitment required to form one in-house, but you must adhere to the timeline and policies of that IRB, which may operate much differently than a zoo or aquarium. There are also fees associated with this approach, which may be cost prohibitive for many institutions.

Categories of IRB review:
- Exempt: minimal risk and de-identified/anonymous (e.g. surveys, interviews, timing & tracking)
- Expedited: minimal risk (e.g. focus groups, audio/video recording)
- Full Committee: more than minimal risk (e.g. research on a sensitive topic or research on vulnerable populations)

Basic criteria for IRB approval
- Risks to human subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to benefits
- Selection of subjects is equitable
- Subjects are informed of risks, benefits and the study procedures; evidence of consent/assent is documented where appropriate
- Adequate provisions to protect privacy and maintain confidentiality
- Additional safeguards for vulnerable populations, such as children or special needs audiences

Resources

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