Simple suggestions to improve New Zealand Ethical Committees

There has recently been a good deal of long overdue debate on the clinical research ethics review process in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{1–3} This has led to a Health Select Committee inquiry into the ethics review system, which has recently requested submissions from interested parties.\textsuperscript{4}

There is widespread agreement amongst researchers that the ethics review system must be substantially changed as it is currently frustrating researchers, wasting their valuable time, and perhaps worse of all, preventing researchers from testing their ideas because they do not have the time or willpower to get a study approved.

As medical researchers for between 11 and 30 years and ex-members of New Zealand Ethics Committees we make the following observations, and suggestions as to how they may be corrected with no loss of ethical integrity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of expertise</td>
<td>Although there is a requirement for two health researchers on each committee, there is often no one with hands-on experience of clinical trials.</td>
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<td>Overly bureaucratic</td>
<td>We should have smaller committees. The international standard is 7 members, but New Zealand committees have 12 members. The more members there are, the more comments researchers have to deal with as many members feel that they have to find “issues” to justify their membership.</td>
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<td>No need to have Justice of the Peace sign-off.</td>
<td>No need to consult Māori for every study. This would be a sensible requirement for research limited to the Māori community, but since 1999 Ethics Committees have insisted that researchers “consult with Māori” for every application. This is often expensive and is unnecessary as there is a requirement for Māori members of each committee, who must surely be there to assess the application from a Māori viewpoint anyway.</td>
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<td>No need for Locality Assessment forms.</td>
<td>Separate, 1–2 page application system for very simple studies with minimal chance of harm for participants eg. surveys.</td>
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<td>Unnecessarily complicated application form</td>
<td>Emphasis of application to change from study minutiae to the actual ethical issues of the study ie. potential harm to participants.</td>
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<td>Slow</td>
<td>Approval by any New Zealand committee should enable that research to be undertaken anywhere in the country, except under the very rare circumstances that there are important local issues to consider.</td>
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Form can be reduced in size by over 50%.

Committee lead reviewer for each study should email the researcher to clarify any potential ethical problems before the meeting.

Letters should be emailed to researchers within 3 days of the meeting, with a hard copy posted. 3 day turnaround for all other routine matters, including final approval after committee questions have been answered.

Increase in Ethics Committees funding for more administrative staff to speed up the process and to prevent the frequent delays due to an administrator being sick or on holiday.
The above suggestions could be easily introduced and would help to turn the current ethics review system from a major hurdle for researchers to more of a “sign-off” process, as it should be for the vast majority of applications which have no important ethical issues.

There is no reason why a simpler system should diminish the quality of the ethical review. On the contrary, a simpler system will enable the committees to focus on the ethical issues (if any) rather than on the minutiae of the complicated application process.

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References: