Reviewer's report

Title: The challenge of empirical research in medical ethics: how conceptual accounts on normative-empirical collaboration may improve research practice.

Version: 2 Date: 17 February 2012

Reviewer: Michael Dunn

Reviewer's report:

Let me begin by thanking the authors for the comprehensive and considered way in which they have addressed the points I raised in my initial review.

I felt that the revised version of the manuscript is significantly improved, and I do not have any further major revisions that I would like to see the authors make.

One residual concern that I have is that, when scrutinized closely, the two models of Birnbacher and Leget et al can be said to be devised in ways that avoid them committing themselves to any meta-ethical presuppositions. This is, of course, the authors’ rationale for selecting these models over other approaches to integrating normative and empirical analysis, such as the hermeneutic or symbiotic model. However, I am content to conclude that my issue with this point falls within the scope of academic disagreement, and does not require major revision.

Minor Essential Revisions

P.10-11: I felt this paragraph confuses normative- and meta-ethical considerations in accounting for the integration of ethical and empirical analyses. When the authors discuss models which rest upon a specific account of ethics (phenomenological; hermeneutic etc.), it seems to me that it is the issue of being open to various meta-ethical, rather than normative ethical, commitments that supports the authors’ choosing the two conceptual accounts detailed. Nothing about being a narrative ethicist, for example, would seem to presuppose that ethicist commits him/herself to any normative theoretical position, but certainly is likely to reflect some commitment to what s/he takes ethics to mean, and require, from broader philosophical premises. I suggest removing the discussion of normative ethical backgrounds and approaches from this paragraph.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests