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: 2 March 2012

Reviewer: Guy Widdershoven

Reviewer's report:

The revisions and responses to the reviewers are well done.

Some minor points remain (discretionary revisions):

1. The title has been improved, but still raises questions. Why ‘The challenge of’? What is meant here? A suggestion is to replace ‘The challenge of…’ by: ‘Integrating…’.

2. On page 13, hermeneutics and reflective equilibrium are presented as different from the approaches presented in the following pages. I appreciate the reference to alternative approaches. Yet, the differences mentioned are not totally convincing. What is meant when the authors say that hermeneutics and reflective equilibrium imply a specific account of ethics? In what sense is a deliberative (hermeneutics) or coherentist (reflective equilibrium) approach (logically) different from a cognitivist view on ethics which is said to be present in Birnbacher’s model? It might be more appropriate to refer to hermeneutics and reflective equilibrium as alternative conceptual accounts of the normative-empirical relationship based on different (meta-ethical and methodological) assumptions. This entails that hermeneutics and reflective equilibrium entail specific suggestions for combining empirical research and normative analysis in a structured way, different from the models presented here (as is rightly stated on page 19). This article is of course not the place to examine the differences in-depth.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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