Reviewer's report

Title: Translational ethics: Which gap? In what direction? What kind of intervention? And whose responsibility?

Version: 3 Date: 18 June 2014

Reviewer: Richard Ashcroft

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting and thoughtful paper which responds to Alan Cribb's paper on the need for "translational ethics research". I have only one significant comment on the paper.

I think it is possible that the author underestimates the extent to which Alan Cribb was writing in a somewhat playful way about the concept of translation. Both the current author and also Alan Cribb are aware that the concept of translation is a metaphor, rather than a literal description, of the process of development from a "discovery" to an "application" of new knowledge. This is true in the context of positive science, and even more obviously so when we are considering "ethical knowledge". The playfulness of Alan Cribb's paper lies in trying to see whether the metaphor applies as well in ethics research and practice as it does in biomedical research. My view is that so long as it is understood as a metaphor, then it can be used in this playful way. But it does not apply well if we take it at face value, any more than the assumption that scientific research and research in bioethics are homologous activities. The present paper seems to take the metaphor too much at face value, only to criticise it for not doing what a good descriptive term should do. Having done so, the paper then rehearses many of the usual arguments why bioethicists are not properly speaking "scientific experts" and the social difficulties in treating bioethics as knowledge and the translation of "theory" into "practice" as more difficult and messy than in positive science. Surprisingly perhaps, the paper concludes by arguing that the paper has identified proper conditions for translational ethics to take place, even though the thrust of the argument seems to be against that very possibility.

One minor comment: the author underplays the role of social science knowledge and theory in bioethics, assuming for the most part that bioethics is philosophy. If the author widened the scope of bioethics to see it as interdisciplinary inquiry, then much of the discussion of the paper could engage fruitfully with the work of Bent Flyvbjerg (Making Social Science Matter) and Andrew Sayer (Why Things Matter to People).

All of these comments are for the author's consideration - I would not state them more strongly than as "discretionary revisions".

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.