Reviewer's report

Title: Evidence-based ethics? On evidence-based practice and the "empirical turn" from normative bioethics

Version: 1  Date: 19 September 2005

Reviewer: Richard Ashcroft

Reviewer's report:

General
This is an elegant and important paper, which presents a good critique of the concept of "evidence-based ethics" as an outgrowth of the "evidence-based medicine" movement. It is original in conception and argument, and deserves to be widely considered.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The only objection I have to the substance of the argument is that author conflates "evidence-based ethics" with "empirical ethics". Much of what is done in the name of the latter is rather subtle, social science informed, qualitative research into the meanings of values and people's ways of discussing, reflecting on or resolving tensions between such values. The author should either expand her argument to discuss the failings of this counter-tendency in "empirical ethics", which tends to be as post-positivist in orientation as the author is, albeit with different concerns; or make it clear that she is discussing only "evidence-based ethics" in the "medical" style. She could also be clearer about what it is that is being rejected. Many ethical arguments deliver specific suggestions about what ought to be done - but the gap between what is intended and what actually happens can undermine these suggestions. This is one way in which ethics should actually talk to the empirical sciences.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
None

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
None

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests