Reviewer's report

Title: Research Ethics Committees in South Africa 10 years into democracy

Version: 1 Date: 20 April 2006

Reviewer: Udo Schuklenk

Reviewer's report:

General
I this this is a 'publish subject to satisfactory revisions or responses to concerns raised' if you have such a category.

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Minor Essential Revisions

1] Under 'Results', clarify what 'community representative' means (how can the claim that such persons represent community be substantiated?)
2] The Conclusion states that the RSA committees' diversity ('race', occupation etc) is suboptimal. Reference is made to RSA guidelines. The trouble here is that the claim of a suboptimal membership range is justified by reference to an RSA government guideline. No ethical argument is provided to evaluate the desirability of such a rule. Until the guideline itself is demonstrated to be sensible, this is kind of begging the question. This problem runs throughout the article, unfortunately. The question is not addressed whether committees should primarily 'represent' the society in which they operate (ie in terms of colour, occupations, rapists etc), or whether they should primarily protect the interests of prospective trial participants. It is far from clear that both can be achieved optimally at the same time. This important conceptual issue is ignored in the paper under review.
3] The sentence after reference [11] must not start with 'on the other handd', because it isn't an 'on the other hand', rather it makes more or less the same point again.
4] The discussion of findings starts with a meaningless sentence stating that the RECs in the country operate reasonably well within the resource constraints. What's problematic about this statement is that 'reasonable' and 'efficient' are not defined (ie reasonable by what standard, measured against which benchmark?), and that they operate under resource constraints is true by definition for any RECs anywhere in the world. There will always be constraints by way of human resources, time, competence etc. This is necessarily true, so without qualifying the statement, this is somewhat meaningless.

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 limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

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