Reviewer’s report

Title: An eight-year follow-up national study of medical school and general hospital ethics committees in Japan

Version: 1 Date: 11 April 2007

Reviewer: Anne Slowther

Reviewer’s report:

General
This is an interesting paper providing a description of the development of ethics committees in Japan and provides a useful addition to the literature on ethics committees worldwide. The authors need to clarify the distinction between research ethics committees and clinical ethics committees earlier in the manuscript to avoid confusion.

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

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

The introduction and background lead the reader to think that the paper is about ethics committees that consider only research (and this is clearly not the case in Japan). The references to international reviews of ethics committees include both research ethics committees and clinical ethics committees while the text implies that they refer to research ethics committees. The introduction and background needs to explain the range of ethics committees (IRB/REC, clinical ethics committee and combined committee (of which the committees in this survey are an example). If the authors are including studies of clinical ethics committees in their references then the definitive UK study is Slowther A, Bunch C, Woolnough B, Hope T. Clinical ethics support services in the UK: an investigation of the current provision of ethics support to health professionals in the UK. Journal of Medical Ethics. 2001;27suppl 1:i2-i8.

In the method the authors refer specifically to a question in the survey regarding development of a policy on refusal of blood transfusion by Jehovah’s witnesses. It would be helpful to explain why that particular question was chosen. It would also be helpful to refer to this in the discussion. For example why do more medical schools committees have policies on this than hospital committees? Do medical school committees develop policy for teaching hospitals? What is their link with clinical practice?

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

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