Reviewer's report

Title: An evaluation of a data linkage training workshop for research ethics committees

Version: 1 Date: 31 October 2014

Reviewer: Francis Barchi

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Discretionary Revisions

1. Under “Stage 3: Recruitment of participants for the training program”: ERCs interested in developing similar types of training programs may be interested to know the level of fees charged for participation in the workshop and whether payment was assessed from individual participants or the ERC of which they were a member.

2. Under “Stage 4: Delivery of the Training Program”: Authors note that the majority of the participants were women. Readers may be curious as to whether this is a reflection of the general composition of HRECs or rather a reflection of self-selection among a membership population including a more balanced number of males and females.

3. Under Authors’ Insertion of Figure 1: authors should consider discussing their implied attribution of one workshop’s high volume of reported decreases in perceived knowledge/understanding to larger group size.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. This article makes an important contribution to the ethics literature as a first effort to deliver and evaluate a tailored ethics program for people responsible for the review of protocols calling for linked data in Australia. They rightly acknowledge in the ‘Limitations’ section of their ‘Conclusion’ that the study does not measure gains in reviewers’ knowledge but rather in their confidence to review. In a number earlier sections of the manuscript, however, the authors refer to knowledge acquisition of participants in a way that might suggest otherwise. Correction of this is important if readers are to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the training program.

2. Under “What is the optimal format for ethics training in data linkage” 2nd to last paragraph: Table 2 provides no data to support that participants found the handout booklet very useful during the training. Do authors mean findings from deferred survey?

3. Authors should detail Australian ethics review requirements for this training program and evaluation, and if appropriate, that a determination of exemption from review was made.

4. Under “What is optimal format for ethics training in data linkage”. Authors do not supply any evidence base for their assertion that “It is unlikely that these
outcomes could have been achieved had the training been online.”

Major Compulsory Revisions: NONE

Minor Issues Not for Publication:
1. Under ‘Methods’ (2nd to last sentence). No need for ending sentence with (87%) has the sentence began with this statistic.
2. Under “Pre- and post-workshop (T1 and T2) responses”:
   a. the first paragraph after authors’ insertion of Table 2, starting with “Prior to the training”, duplicates the first paragraph after authors’ insertion of Table 1.
   b. 2nd paragraph after authors’ insertion of Table 2, paragraph beginning with “Table 2 highlights the relationship…”, Error! Reference source not found appears. This should be removed and corrections made as needed.
3. Language corrections to address Essential Minor Revisions comment #1:
   a. Under “Stage 5: Survey of participants”, 2nd to last paragraph: “Pre- and post-training surveys included eight impact statements measuring participants’ knowledge, perceived levels of skills development and confidence”. Survey did not test for knowledge.
   b. Under “Pre- and Post workshop (T1 and T2”, sentence beginning with “Prior to the training”. To ensure that readers are clear that this survey did not test actual knowledge, sentence should read “…. Participants… overall reported lower understanding.., less awareness…. Less knowledge, etc.” or equivalent, rather than as currently written.
   c. Last sentence of same paragraph currently reads “It also demonstrates that both groups improved following the training”. For clarity: “It also demonstrates that both groups reported improvements following the training.”
   d. Last sentence of 5th paragraph under “Deferred survey (T3) responses: “The deferred web-based survey revealed that the training had a positive impact of participant’s ability to review…” Clarify as “The deferred web-based survey revealed that the training had a positive impact on participants’ self-reported [or perceived] ability to review…”
   e. Under “What is the optimal format for ethics training in data linkage” last paragraph: Sentence: “The number of participants at a workshop impacted on participants’ learning”. Better with “participants’ self-reported learning”.
4. Under “Deferred survey (T3) responses, 2nd paragraph, 1st sentence: “Confidence in reviewing data linkage applications improved as a result of the training for 87% of the participants.” Clarify that this result was reported by 87% of the participants who completed the Deferred Survey. Same issue reappears in first sentence under “Can a training workshop increase participants’ confidence and ability…..”.
5. Under “Can a training workshop increase participants’ confidence and ability to make informed decisions when reviewing data linkage applications?”. Problem with tables. Table T1 does not appear to be relevant to second sentence.
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.