

HREC Standard Operating Procedure

3.1 Qualitative Methods

Statement of Intent and Outcomes

The St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne (SVHM) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) is committed to fulfilling Section 3.1 of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023) by ensuring all research encompassing qualitative methods is appropriately reviewed.

Definitions

Qualitative research is defined as the inquiry that examines people's lives, experiences and behaviours, and the stories and meanings individuals ascribe to them. It can also be defined as the investigation of organisational functioning, relationships between individuals and groups and social environments.

Procedures

Ethical review and subsequent approval performed by a full HREC is required for all research before commencement, as defined by Section 5.1.6 of The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023). Those protocols assessed as involving minimal risk are eligible for review via the expedited Low Risk Research pathway, as per Procedure 5.1.

To ensure the appropriate assessment of qualitative research proposals, the HREC must be familiar with, and apply the principles of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023), and in particular, Sections 3.1.1 to 3.1.17.

Individualised review of qualitative methods must occur to ensure all methodologies and instruments used to collect data are appropriate, well defined and based on published literature. This also applies to the method of transcription (as appropriate) and analysis. Novel methods and invalidated instruments must be subject to more intensive review, to ensure ethical acceptability.

The rigour of qualitative methods must not be judged based on sample size, validity or reliability, as defined in research designs that employ quantitative methods; this must be undertaken on the basis of the study method, supportive literature, data collection and analysis put forward for review.

In the event further expertise is required, the Committee, Chairman or Research Governance Unit may co-opt individuals both internally, and externally to obtain this expert opinion, at any time.

Qualitative methods that explore sensitive topics which may elicit distress must contain a well-defined protocol for the management of participants if they experience any discomfort during the research. This must include both immediate actions that will be taken and a

process of referral as required (i.e. this may include immediate cessation of the study and immediate counselling, or referral to an appropriate counselling service).

The relationship between the researcher and the participant/s must also be considered. To minimise potential coercion and workplace discomfort, researchers must not conduct qualitative research where data will be identified with staff within their own unit, unless justified. When such research occurs, measures to protect anonymity should be taken.


Associated Procedures/Instructions

Procedure 5.1 – Low Risk Research

Reference Documents

- The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023)
- Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders (2018)
- Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2018)

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