

HREC Standard Operating Procedure

5.12 Conflicts of Interest

Statement of Intent and Outcomes

The St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne (SVHM) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) is committed to fulfilling Section 5.6 of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023) by ensuring that all members declare any potential conflicts of interest, and that such conflicts are managed appropriately.

Definitions

Conflict of Interest is defined in the context of research as:

- A person's individual interests or responsibilities have the potential to influence the carrying out of his or her institutional role or professional obligations in research; or
- An institution's interests or responsibilities have the potential to influence the carrying out of its research obligations.

A **Conflict of Interest** may be defined as:

- **Actual** - A conflict of interest is a situation in which financial or other personal considerations have the potential to compromise or bias professional judgment and objectivity.
- **Apparent** - An apparent conflict of interest is one in which a reasonable person would think that the professional's judgment is likely to be compromised.
- **Potential** - A potential conflict of interest involves a situation that may develop into an actual conflict of interest.

It is important to note that a conflict of interest exists whether or not decisions are affected by a personal interest. A conflict of interest implies only the potential for bias, not likelihood. It is also important to note that a conflict of interest is not considered misconduct in research, since the definition for misconduct is currently limited to fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism.

There are many varieties of conflicts of interest, and they appear in different settings and across all disciplines. While conflicts of interest apply to a "wide range of behaviours and circumstances" they all involve the use of a person's authority for personal and/or financial gain. Conflicts of interest may involve individuals as well as institutions. Furthermore, individuals, in certain circumstances, may have conflicts occurring on both an individual and an institutional level.

Procedures

To ensure all conflicts of interest are appropriately declared, all members of the HREC must be familiar with, and apply the principles of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023), and in particular, Section 5.6.

A conflict may relate to financial interests, as well as other private, professional or institutional benefits or advantages that depend significantly on the research outcomes. A conflict of interest may compromise the research process itself and/or the institutional processes governing research, and may lead researchers or institutions to base decisions about the research on factors outside the research requirements. A perception that a conflict of interest exists can be as serious as an actual conflict, raising concerns about an individual's integrity or an institution's management practices.

The Application Form must detail any potential conflicts of interest for all members of the research team. This must also be assessed during ethical review.

Similarly, all members of the HREC are obliged to disclose any actual, apparent or potential conflict of interest, including any financial or other interest or affiliation that bears on any research under review. 'Conflicts of Interest' will remain as a permanent agenda item to provide members with an opportunity to declare any such interests, and to have them formally documented within the minutes.

Intentional failure to declare such conflicts will be treated seriously and actioned by the Chair and/or Deputy Director, with additional support from the Director of Research, and Human Resources as required.

Once a conflict has been disclosed, members must leave the room during the discussion of item for which they have declared a conflict of interest. As a general guide, if the member is a Principal or Associate Researcher on a project submitted for discussion, the member must leave the room during the decision making process. For online meetings, the member must disconnect, or will be allocated to a "breakout room" by administrative staff for the duration of the discussion of the agenda item. These actions will be formally minuted.

A formal declaration must be signed by all members (termed the "Members Agreement"), to confirm they understand their responsibilities in terms of declaring conflicts of interest.

A formal declaration must also be signed by reviewers approached for Expert Opinion (termed the "Expert Opinion Agreement"), to confirm they understand their responsibilities in terms of declaring conflicts of interest. If a conflict of interest is identified, the reviewer must not provide an expert opinion, and an alternative must be found.

All conflicts of interest reported by HREC members, institutions and/or researchers must be communicated to all relevant parties, as appropriate. This will be done in writing.

Associated Procedures/Instructions

Procedure 5.4 – Induction of New HREC Members

Procedure 5.5 – Responsibilities of HREC Members


Procedure 5.7 – Documentation and Record Management

Procedure 5.9 – Making and Communicating Decisions

Reference Documents

- The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023)
- Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2018)

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