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ARTICLE

Open and Closed Committees

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Introduction

In 'Secret ethics business?' Gillam questions whether the workings of Human Research Ethics Committees should be treated as confidential.¹ She focuses on ethics committees' meetings and asks if what we can call the 'confidentiality argument' is valid and ethical. She presents arguments for why the workings of these committees should be open, and like many others, cites a need for accountability and transparency.

We found Gillam's article of particular interest because all her points, including the arguments for and against open committee meetings, have come up in our research. In fact since late 2002 we have used the expression 'secret ethics committee business', an intentional word play, in presentations of early findings. Furthermore, Gillam's arguments are consistent with ones we have put forward for why ethics committees should be more open. However, we present this case based not so much on ethical arguments, although they are definitely relevant, but on the idea that greater openness seems to resolve some common problems with and complaints about ethics committees and the researchers who submit applications to them. We think that one result of more openness is more ethical review of applications, more ethically sound applications, and a higher and more widely shared ethical standard for conducting research. The information presented here suggests that open committees are more ethically consistent with the ethical standards set by these committees for researchers. Researchers are expected to be open in relation to their research policies and procedures. Ethics committees should hold themselves to the same standard.

We came to the same conclusions as Gillam through a different process. We came to them through research on the ethical review process as culture and cultural process. Our position is based on experiences trying to obtain permission to observe committees, and extensive formal² and informal interviews with people in four countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States of America), observations of committee meeting in three of these countries, the collection of instrumental or cases studies, and an extensive (and on-going) review of the literature and documents.

The idea of open vs closed committees first arose early in the research when we were refused permission to observe some committees in Australia. To date we have approached 32 committees and observed