Respectful Research

BY KATIE CHALMERS-BROOKS

Researchers would only get so far in their quest to understand what makes people tick if they couldn’t involve human participants in their investigations.

Every day, researchers at the University of Manitoba and other institutions across Canada depend on people willingly taking part in clinical trials and studies.

Researchers owe it to these participants to make research ethics a top priority, says psychology professor Bruce Tefft.

“Research wouldn’t get done without the good will of participants. Researchers and the research community, in my view, should be doing everything we can to ensure that we continue to enjoy this good will of participants,” says Tefft, who is chair of the University of Manitoba’s Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board. “People are willing to volunteer their time and – in some cases – even undergo unpleasant experiences if they know they will be treated well and if they think it’s going to contribute to the greater good.”

Tefft applauded the University of Manitoba for the recent launch of the Quality Assurance Program for Human Research, which will provide researchers with guidelines and ongoing education in ethics, and include voluntary – and eventually random – audits. The program, developed by the Office of the Vice-President (Research), is in anticipation of there being a national governing body that would likely require universities to undergo accreditation for research involving humans.

Monica Woods, research quality assurance manager, says at this point researchers can voluntarily get involved.

“It’s a collaborative program where we work together with the researchers,” says Woods. “Already there is great research expertise within the university. We have many competent researchers who are aware of their responsibilities and are concerned for the welfare of the people who voluntarily participate in research. We want to build on that and provide them with resources within their own institution.”

Tefft says the move suggests the university is forward-thinking. “To its credit, the U of M is trying to get ahead of the curve and be proactive, and in a voluntary way do what we probably will have to do in the not too distant future,” he says.

Talks about forming a unified body across Canada have been going on for years. To date, Canada’s three federal granting agencies – CHIR, NSERC and SSHRC – have developed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans. This document prompted universities to develop their own infrastructure to oversee the protection of participants. Researchers now submit proposals to research ethic boards like the one that exist at the U of M.

While all these steps have led to improvements, there is still no cross-country unifying voice on the issue and no way to gauge how well each institution is doing, a national committee of researchers and research ethics board members said in a 2008 report. The Experts Committee for Human Research Participant Protection in Canada recommended there be a universal set of standards.

“The principal problem is that the governance of research in Canada today is fragmented and uneven,” the committee stated. “The committee indicated there are holes in coverage and may be competing interests” since federal granting agencies who fund and oversee the research must also act as a steward.

Researcher Monica Woods, Research Quality Assurance Manager, at 272-5121

The report notes the push for a national governing body has not been without controversy – some say the added bureaucracy could impede a researcher’s work, cost too much, take much too long and be cumbersome. The committee says they took all those concerns into account and argue that many organizations already have some sort of participant protection arrangement in place and adjusting to the new system would be straightforward. They say a common plan would actually improve researchers’ work and save time.

Nursing professor Roberts Woodgate, a member of a national team examining the governance of ethical research involving humans, believes it’s important for Canada to develop capacity in research ethics and governance.

She knows firsthand how crucial it is to have good research ethics, given the nature of her own research work. Woodgate has explored how parents decide to include their children with cancer in clinical trials and how research ethics board members, child health researchers, and the kids themselves perceive and assess the risks of involving children in research. Trust in the researcher and the university played a big part in both of her studies.

“It is imperative that we uphold the trust between the research community and the community as a whole,” Woodgate says.

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Manitoba Institute of Child Health Research Day

Thursday, November 12, 2009
7:30 AM - 5:00 PM
Frederic Gaspard Theatre (Theatre A)
Basic Medical Sciences Building

For more info: www.mich.ca

Café Scientifique

Autism: Solving the Mysteries

Wednesday, November 4, 2009
7:00 PM
McNally Robinson, Polo Park
1485 Portage Avenue

For more info: www.umanitoba.ca/research

Photo by Katie Chalmers-Brooks

U of M ‘ahead of the curve’ with new ethics program for research involving humans

Psychology professor Bruce Tefft has been doing research for three decades.

Researcher Monica Woods, Research Quality Assurance Manager, at 272-5121

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Photo by Katie Chalmers-Brooks

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