INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL ETHICS

Research methods in medical ethics:
IME guidance for Elective Bursary Projects

Research in medical ethics takes various forms, and can use a range of different methods. It is important that you are able to demonstrate an understanding of the methods you propose to use, provide an account of why the methods you have chosen can help you answer your research question, and show an appreciation of the challenges and feasibility of your proposed project. It is important that you can demonstrate you have thought carefully about the methods you will use and that you have a plan for conducting your research.

When outlining your project, there are some key things to bear in mind.

1. Research question or aim: Do you have a clear research question or aim that makes clear what you are trying to achieve? This may be a question (for example *"This project asks 'Is it permissible to tax unhealthy foods to promote public health?");* it could be a statement of an exploratory aim (for example *"This project aims to explore the permissibility of taxing unhealthy foods to promote public health"*); or it could be statement of intent (for example: *"This project will argue that it is ethically permissible to tax unhealthy foods in order to promote public health"*.

2. Method: Once you have a question or aim, you need to outline how you plan to answer the question or meet the aim. Generally, there are two ways that you might approach this:

    a. Theoretical/Reflective ethics projects: This is a standard approach that involves thinking about the problem conceptually, and using a process of logical reasoning and argument to arrive at an answer, often drawing on moral theory and sometimes other theoretical accounts (i.e. legal theory, theology, sociology, models of reflection). You will look at what other authors have said about the issues, critique them, and develop your own account of the problem and its solution. If using this approach, you need to state that you will be undertaking theoretical research and briefly outline the main ethical arguments and key thinkers you expect to engage with. You do not need to actually start making an argument, but the best applications might make clear the order in which key material and arguments will be tackled and why.

    b. Empirical ethics: This is a more contemporary approach that still involves thinking about the problem conceptually, but also involves undertaking some empirical research that is designed to inform or guide your conceptual thinking. If using this approach, it is important that you do the following:

        i. State clearly what the purpose of your empirical research is. For example: are you interviewing people in order to get a better understanding of how to characterise an ethical problem or question? Are you speaking to practitioners

to find out how acceptable or workable a proposed solution to a problem is? Are you gathering data about what people value or prefer in order to inform your ethical judgement?

ii. State what empirical method you will use (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, observations) and why, and demonstrate an understanding of what the method involves.

The best applications will provide some (brief) explanation of how the data collected can inform your conceptual thinking about the ethical problem. For example, you might be collecting the public's views on whether or not unhealthy food ought to be taxed in order to try to understand people's objections, so that you can create an argument that deals with those objections.

Useful introductory reading for empirical bioethics:

- Strong K, Lipworth W, Kerridge I. (2010) The Strengths and Limitations of Empirical Bioethics. Journal of Law and Medicine.18(2):316-9 (https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/10801/3/JLM%20the%20strengths.pdf)

- Owens J, Cribb A, Ives J. (2012) IEEN workshop report: Aims and methods in interdisciplinary and empirical bioethics. Clinical Ethics 7(4): 157-160 (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1258/ce.2012.012031)

- Ives J, Owens J, Cribb A, (2013) IEEN workshop report: Teaching and Learning in Interdisciplinary and Empirical Ethics. Clinical Ethics. 8(2-3) (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4469542/)

- Davies R, Ives J, Dunn M, (2015) A Systematic Review of Empirical Bioethics Methodologies. BMC Medical Ethics, 16. (https://bmcmedethics.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12910-015-0010-3) (*NB. The lead author of this paper conducted this systematic review for her research project whilst she was intercalating in ethics*).

- Ives J, Dunn M, Cribb A. (2017) Empirical Bioethics: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.