



# INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL ETHICS

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## 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, and some key components to include. The best research proposals will say something about all of the items below, and we advise you to structure your proposal following sections 1-6 below.

### **1. Title**

The title can either be in the form of a statement that describes what your research will do, or in the form of a question. It should be clear and concise.

### **2. Aim and research question(s)**

Your proposal should have an overarching aim that makes it clear what you are trying to achieve. This may be a question (for example *“This project asks the question ‘It is permissible to tax unhealthy foods to promote public health’”*); it could a statement of an exploratory aim (for example *“This project aims to explore the permissibility of taxing healthy 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”*).

*Example:*

- *Aim: To identify the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services in the UK, and make recommendations for how these should be addressed*

Your proposal should also have specific research question(s) that can be answered in order to meet your aim. Proposals should have at least one primary research question and *may* also include further secondary questions. Answering the secondary question(s) helps you to answer the primary question. Your primary research question may be very similar to your aim, but should be phrased as a question.

*Example:*

- *Primary research question: What are the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services in the UK, and how should these be addressed?*
- *Secondary research questions:*

- What, according to the literature, are the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services, and recommendations for how these should be addressed?
- What, according to those involved in the provision of clinical ethics support in the UK, are the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services, and recommendations for how these should be addressed?
- How should the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services in the UK be addressed?

### **3. Outline, background and importance**

Here you should explain what is known about your chosen topic, making reference to relevant literature, and explain what the gaps are in our knowledge/understanding. You should clearly show that we do not currently have an answer (or a good answer) or have several competing answers to the research question(s) you are proposing. You should then explain why answering that question is important and how your work will contribute to our understanding of the issues under examination, thus furthering knowledge and academic debate.

*In this section, your job is to persuade us that you have a good question and that the research is sufficiently important for us to fund your project.*

### **4. Approach (methodology and methods)**

Research in medical ethics and law takes various forms and can use a range of different methods. It is important that you are able to demonstrate an entry level 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.

Whatever discipline your proposal is based in, you will need to decide whether you will conduct theoretical/library-based research, or a combination of empirical and theoretical research. Here, we provide some guidance on each:

#### *Theoretical Projects:*

Projects may be entirely literature-led. Such projects will essentially involve thinking about the problem conceptually or doctrinally, reading and engaging critically with others' accounts and/or (for example) primary legal sources, and using argument to arrive at an answer to the research question(s). The exact process (and the sources you use) will depend on your question and your home discipline but, broadly, you will be critically examining different positions and accounts, looking at what others have said about the issues, and developing your own account of the problem and proposing a solution.

If you are taking this approach, you need to state that you will be undertaking theoretical/doctrinal research and briefly outline the main sources (e.g. legislation, judgments, arguments and thinkers) you expect to engage with. You do not need to actually start conducting analysis or making an argument, but the best proposals will: (a) make clear the order in which key material and arguments will be tackled and why; and (b) make clear any theoretical commitments and/or lenses through which your analysis will be conducted, making reference to approach(es) in the relevant discipline(s) e.g. philosophy, law, bioethics, sociology.

#### *Combined Empirical-Theoretical Projects:*

In addition to theoretical engagement, projects may include an empirical dimension i.e. quantitative or qualitative inquiries, which are designed to help answer the research question(s). Such projects



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**Combined Empirical-Theoretical Project:**

Month/ Task	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Lit review												
Develop protocol												
Ethics approval												
Recruitment												
Data collection												
Data analysis												
Drafting chapters												
Finalise												

**6. Bibliography (references)**

Please ensure you properly cite all sources you use in your proposal and include a list of references at the end.