# 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, 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

will involve thinking about the problem conceptually, but also undertaking some empirical research that is designed to inform or guide your conceptual thinking. This approach might be captured by the terms "empirical bioethics" and/or "socio-legal studies".

If you anticipate taking such an approach, it is important that you do the following:

- 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/legal problem or question? Are you speaking to practitioners or other stakeholders 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 own critical judgement?
- State which empirical method(s) you will use (e.g. interviews, focus groups, questionnaires) and why, and demonstrate an understanding of what the chosen method involves.
- State your proposed approach to analysis of any data you plan to collect (e.g. thematic analysis, descriptive statistics).
- If empirical data and theory are to be combined, then the strongest applications will situate the proposed study in the relevant methodological literature e.g. "empirical bioethics" or "socio-legal studies".

When outlining your approach, you need to show that you have enough preliminary understanding of your proposed methods and methodology to undertake your research project. It is important that the methods you propose are feasible and will enable you to answer your research questions and meet your aim. If you know that you will be trained in the methods you will use as part your programme, make that clear.

## 5. Anticipated timeline/milestones

In this section you can demonstrate further understanding of your methods, and the feasibility of what you propose, by defining key milestones (key things that you need to achieve in your project), the order in which you need to do them, and how long you think it will take to do each. Examples of milestones include research ethics approvals, data collection, analysis, chapter drafting, and training. Milestones and timings will change as your project progresses – and you will not necessarily be held to what you propose here. What we are looking for here is for you to demonstrate an understanding of what it is feasible to achieve in the time you have available for your project. You might wish to provide a Gantt chart covering the months of the project. We illustrate below a Gantt chart, which plots milestones on the timeline. The illustration is for one year, using two fictional (and incomplete) examples.

Theoretical Project:												
Month/	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Task												
Lit												
review												
Draft												
ch1												
Draft												
ch2												
Draft												
ch3												
Draft												
ch4												

Example:

Finalise						

#### Combined Empirical-Theoretical Project:

Month/	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Task												
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.