Research Ethics
Annual Report
2016-17

Research Ethics, Dalhousie University

Research Ethics advances the strategic objectives of Dalhousie Research Services by providing knowledgeable guidance and timely research ethics review and oversight of research involving humans.

Catherine Connors, Director
August 2017
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Fast Facts

- 3,000+ reviews (308 new submissions, 187 amendments, 266 continuing reviews, 273 final reports, 43 approval terminations for non-compliance with continuing review reporting requirements). This reflects a 42% increase in new submissions over the last eight years.
- 21 day average turnaround time for initial REB review to researchers.
- 2 Research Ethics Boards (Health Sciences, Social Sciences & Humanities).
- 22 Board meetings per year.
- 29 Board members (average of 2.2 new projects for each REB member to review each month).
- 1,133 researchers completed the TCPS online course on research ethics.
- 27% of new projects reviewed are funded research (14% are tri-agency funded).
- 93% of new submissions involve prospective research; 7% of new submissions are exclusively secondary use of information for research.
- 12% of new submissions to the University REBs require REB review at more than one institution (multi-jurisdictional).

Summary

Research Ethics at Dalhousie University was managed with 2.0 full-time equivalent staff positions: a director (90%), a manager (20%) and an administrative coordinator (90%). The staff coordinates and supports the work of two Research Ethics Boards: Health Sciences and Social Sciences and Humanities. There are 22 Board meetings scheduled each year and 29 Board members (23 of whom are members of the University; 6 are community members). The Research Ethics Boards and administrative staff conducted over 3,000 reviews, including review of 308 new research projects, 187 amendments, 266 continuing reviews, 273 final reports and 43 ethical approval terminations for non-compliance with continuing review reporting requirements, and quarterly reports from research ethics boards at affiliated hospitals (IWK Health Centre, Nova Scotia Health Authority and Horizon Health). Research Ethics authorized release of funds agreements with researchers to permit research-related activity to proceed prior to the requirement for research ethics review; the office also coordinated the peer review process on behalf of the University Committee on Laboratory Animals.

This report offers an overview of the activity of Research Ethics over this reporting period, from April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017.
Appointments

There was a change in the leadership of the Health Sciences Research Ethics Board. Dr. Brenda Beagan (Occupational Therapy) ended her term as chair in June and Dr. Tannis Jurgens (College of Pharmacy) was appointed to assume the chair in July. Dr. Karen Beazley continued as chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board.

There was also a change in the staffing of the Research Ethics office. Julianna Serroul, part-time manager (40%) since April 2014, was re-assigned to other duties in the Research Services office in October and the director resumed a 100% appointment. In January, Angela Hersey was appointed to a full-time manager position and the position of administrative assistant was reduced to 40% (shared position with Research Services) for a total complement of 2.4 FTE in Research Ethics by the end of this reporting period.

In addition to staffing interruptions during the year, Board membership also faced shortfalls; several Faculties were not able to meet their membership obligations throughout the year and instances of limited meeting attendance were also problematic.
Accomplishments & Initiatives

Working Group: ethics and scholarship of teaching and learning research (summer/fall 2016) A sub-committee of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB engaged in the development of guidelines for the ethical conduct of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) research. Guidelines were drafted, input was invited through university-wide consultation and guidelines were adopted by REBs. The guidelines identify the key ethical challenges of SoTL research, with the overarching aim of articulating the issues, recommending best practices and communicating these clearly to researchers to support the conduct of ethically sound SoTL research. The ethical issues pertain to four key domains in the conduct of SoTL research: (a) undue influence and coercion; (b) dual-role research; (c) confidentiality in the use of participant data; and, (d) the use of class time for research purposes.

Model confidentiality agreement A template confidentiality agreement was created as a resource for researchers, to clarify roles and responsibilities with respect to confidentiality of research participant information by study personnel such as transcriptionists and research staff.

Unit-level review reporting A communications plan was implemented for unit-level review reporting of ethical reviews delegated to schools, departments and faculties (for course-based, minimal risk research). Reports will be due in May 2017.

Online review platform An online platform was created for sharing ethics documents with Board members for review using Brightspace online learning system (effective June 2016).

Consultation on updates to TCPS Shared the opportunity for researcher feedback on the national Panel on Research Ethics consultations on proposed updates to the TCPS with the university community (Oct 2016 – Jan 2017).

Advancement of University policy objective Sustainability reported achievement of goal from the University Paper Policy set by the Sustainability Office and the President’s Advisory Council on Sustainability to increase paper efficiency (through electronic submissions to research ethics).

Staffing The director was asked to propose a new staffing plan for Research Ethics to accommodate the reallocation of the existing part-time manager position within DRS. A new full-time manager job description was created, shepherded through the job evaluation process, a successful search was conducted and the successful incumbent was trained. A temporary part-time (40%) assistant position was created, a candidate hired and trained.

Office move The research ethics office moved from Hicks Building to Collaborative Health Education Building (effective February 2017).
Educational Activity

Research Ethics supported educational opportunities for Board members, staff and the research community. The director and the Research Ethics Board chairs were all involved in presentations and discussions regarding research ethics principles and the review process with members of the University research community, especially students.

Educational activities included:

- Presentations on research ethics to students and/or the University community.
- Research Ethics Boards chairs and director attended the Canadian Association of Research Ethics Boards national conference (May 2016).
- Research Ethics manager attended the Canadian Association of Research Ethics Boards regional conference (November 2016).
- Invited guest speakers for REB members on topics including:
  - Ethical issues and lessons learned from go-along interviews with participants with mental health challenges (SSH REB July 2016)
  - Wigmore test and participant confidentiality (SSH REB December 2016)
  - Electronic data security best practices (Health REB February 2017 and SSH REB March 2017)
  - Ethical and methodological implications of health research with Mi’Kmaq communities in Nova Scotia following implementation of TCPS2 (Health REB July 2016)
- REB orientation program for incoming members.
- Researchers were encouraged to complete the TCPS online Course on Research Ethics; 1,133 Dalhousie researchers completed the course over the year; 4,893 researchers completed the tutorial since its inception in June 2011.

“Thank you for taking the time to review my research application so carefully for the second time. Your committee has raised some excellent concerns and highlighted some important areas that need improvement.” (Medical student)
Profile of New Research Ethics Submissions

Board Assignment

- Social Sciences & Humanities 56%
- Health Sciences 44%

Proportionate Review (Full Board vs Delegated Review)

- Delegated review 84%
- Full review 16%

Researcher Profile

- Faculty/St aff 47%
- Student - Undergraduate 18%
- Student - Graduate 36%

Disposition of reviews

- Approved as submitted 12%
- 2+ reviews by Board reviewers 28%
- 2+ reviews by staff 57%
- 2+ reviews by Full Board 1%
- Withdrawn 2%

“Thanks so much for your prompt turn-around! We’ve been very impressed by the efficiency of the REB.” (Post-doctoral fellow)
“Thank you and the entire REB team for helping get through this. You guys have been fantastic.” (Doctoral student)
Board Membership*

**Health Sciences Research Ethics Board**

- Tannis Jurgens (chair)
- Lee Belyea
- Chris Blanchard
- Martha Brillant
- Merle Emms
- Jacqueline Gahagan
- Edward Gores
- Gordon Gubitz
- Melanie Keats
- Michel Ladouceur
- Alissa Pencer
- Sam Stewart
- Lori Weeks
- Swarna Weerasinghe

**Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board**

- Karen Beazley (chair)
- Scott Comber
- Steven Dukeshire
- Jean-Sebastien Guy
- Kirstie Hawkey
- Aaron Newman
- Robin Oakley
- Laurene Rehman
- Matthew Schnurr
- Don Sinclair
- Binod Sundararajan
- Tracy Taylor-Helmick
- Sara Torres
- Cathie Watson
- Diane Zwicker

**Staff**

- Catherine Connors (director)
- Angela Hersey (manager)
- Keerthi Luthra (assistant, 40%)

*As of March 31, 2017

**Core Principles:**

Respect for Persons
Concern for Welfare
Justice