

## Time to rethink the ethics issue

SARAH RUSSELL THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 27, 2013 12:00AM

**ALL research undertaken at universities must first be reviewed and approved by a human research ethics committee. The national ethics application form provides an opportunity for researchers to reflect upon the ethical issues related to their research, particularly the impact it may have on participants.**

The prevailing view among researchers is that it is a bureaucratic obstacle. Many university departments provide seminars instructing staff how to get their work through the research ethics "gates". Researchers learn how to jump through hoops by using standard phrases. These phrases are meaningless unless they reflect practice. Take, for example, the phrase "the data will be kept securely for five years from the date of the project's completion before being destroyed". The commitment to keep data secure is difficult to monitor. Academics state in the application that data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, a password-protected file or, as in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, in a "filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard' ". In reality, data may sit for days on an academic's desk or be taken home.

Another common phrase is "participants will be informed about academic publications that present the findings". However, with so many academics on short-term contracts, a researcher may commence their research at one university, and then publish the findings when employed at another. Although some academics have the foresight to take copies of their research files, including those with participants' contact details, others don't.

Similarly, although participants are assured they can "contact the researcher with any questions", when an academic's contract ends, their university email address becomes defunct.

Researchers often state in their application: "Only the named researchers will have access to any data associated with this project." However, by the time data is analysed, new academics may have joined the research team. Some researchers make an amendment to include the names of the new team members, others do not.

Some researchers consider that ethical research is simply a matter of "jumping through hoops". Once the research has been approved, they just get on with it in ways that they see fit.

Maybe it is time to review some of the content of the ethics application to reflect the state of university employment contracts. Alternatively, universities may need to make some systemic changes to help academics to do what they say they will do.

Sarah Russell is the principal researcher at Research Matters in Melbourne.