

**Health Canada Research Ethics Board
Board Survey 2004**

Summary Report

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Research Ethics Board Survey 2004

Summary Report

The eight members of the Health Canada Research Ethics Board (REB) were asked a number of closed and open ended questions about the following areas: meetings, training, support, priorities for the REB, and the impact of the REB. All eight board members completed the survey. This report provides a summary of the survey findings.

1.0 Meetings

Questions were asked about different aspects of REB meetings including workload, scheduling, travel arrangements, facilities, location, services, and videoconferencing.

1.1 Board meetings

Board members were asked to rate their level of agreement with six statements about Board meetings. The following table provides a summary of the results for these statements.

Table 1: Aspects of meetings

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a. Meetings are planned in accordance with the needs of the workload.			12.5% (1)	37.5% (3)	50% (4)
b. Travel arrangements are made promptly.				14.3% (1)	85.7% (6)
c. Travel arrangements are convenient.				33.3% (2)	66.7% (4)
d. Meetings are held at suitable facilities/meeting rooms.					100% (8)
e. Meetings should continue to be held in the Regions as well as in Ottawa.	12.5% (1)		25% (2)	12.5% (1)	50% (4)
f. The translators provide clear and precise translation about various issues discussed at meetings.			33.3% (2)	50% (3)	16.7% (1)

Note: Some participants did not answer every question.

1.2 Current workload and monthly meetings

When asked to comment about the current workload and monthly meetings, half of the board members replied that the current workload was “fine”, “tolerable” or “manageable” and most (6) agreed that the workload warranted monthly meetings. This is consistent with the way in which members rated the statement, “meetings are planned in accordance with the needs of the workload” (see Table 1). One board member cautioned that “studies are being delayed” because the REB only meets monthly and expressed that more frequent meetings may be needed as the workload increases.



1.3 Board meeting arrangements and facilities

All board members provided very favourable comments about meeting arrangements and facilities such as “excellent in all respects”, “conveniently arranged and well administered” and “very well organized”. These comments are consistent with the way in which board members responded to statements about the promptness and convenience of travel arrangements and the suitability of facilities/meeting rooms (see Table 1).

1.4 Location

As shown in Table 1, there was notable variance in responses regarding the location of meetings. One board member strongly disagreed with the statement, “Meetings should continue to be held in the Regions as well as in Ottawa.” Five board members, however, “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this statement. While there was variance in responses, none of the board members provided any comments about location.

1.5 Translation

Six board members answered the question about translation. Two board members responded “neutral”, while the other four members “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the translators provide clear and precise translation about various issues discussed at meetings. Two issues were raised regarding translation services: translation of videoconferencing and translation of documentation/applications received by board members. These issues are mentioned in upcoming sections.

1.6 Videoconferencing

Board members provided mixed feedback about whether or not there is a need for videoconferencing for members who are unable to attend meetings. Half of the board members commented that it was a “very good idea” or could be “very useful”. Concern was expressed about the expense involved and whether translation services would be available. Two members expressed that videoconferencing was not necessary, commenting that participation in previous videoconferences had not worked well and there is no need if supplementary members are involved.

2.0 Training

Members were asked several questions about current and future training initiatives. Six members “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they received necessary training to perform their responsibilities as a board member. One member rated this statement as “neutral” while another member expressed “strong disagreement” with the statement.

Five members were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the opportunities currently provided for ongoing training to board members. Two members rated this statement as “neutral” and one did not respond.



The following further training initiatives for board members were identified:

- Briefing on national initiatives regarding ethics of research involving Native Peoples
- Periodic presentations and discussions about ethical topics
- Exposure to every Branch (their mandates and activities)
- Updates to the field of ethics as they are developed
- Presentations from different Directorates in Health Canada to educate the Board about their work and research

3.0 Support

Members were asked a range of questions about the support provided to them by the Secretariat such as overall satisfaction with support, improvements to services, required resources, initiatives and issues, and researchers' presentations.

3.1 Overall satisfaction with support

When asked to rate their overall level of satisfaction, all eight board members responded that they were "very satisfied" with the support provided to them by the Secretariat.

3.2 Improvements to service

Two board members stated that the Secretariat is currently operating very efficiently and two other members reiterated their satisfaction with the support provided by the Secretariat.

The following suggestions were made regarding improving the service offered by the Secretariat:

- Don't accept protocols for review that cannot be reviewed in person by the Board unless it is an emergency
- Documentation for the Board is only available in English which requires additional preparation time for some members
- The manner in which the protocols are received could be timed better

3.3 Required resources

When asked if there were other resources required to assist them in participating in REB meetings, all but one board member responded "no". The board member who replied "yes", commented that he/she spends a "considerable amount of money remaining in email and phone contact with my workplace". While this is covered by his/her employer, this member expressed a concern that these additional costs might be an issue for other members.

3.4 Initiatives and issues

All of the board members responded “yes” to the statement, “Would it be helpful to have the Secretariat inform the Board of initiatives and issues arising in Health Canada regarding research ethics?” In their comments, many members reiterated that this would be very helpful and would enrich the discussions by the committee. One person suggested the following means of keeping informed: having a quarterly summary of initiatives and issues, receiving pertinent email links or having an internal newsletter. It should be noted that two members commented that the Board is already informed of initiatives and issues.

3.5 Researchers’ presentations

All of the board members responded “yes” when asked if the researchers’ presentations meet the need for effective and efficient use of time. Two members stressed the importance of having researchers present their projects to the Board. Three members expressed that presentations are “good”, “to the point” and “for the most part, excellent and effective presentations”. It was identified that some presentations are “too lengthy for addressing more standard ethics concerns” and that it might be “helpful to give the presenters an outline of points they must cover” so that the presentations are more focused.

While two board members expressed that the Secretariat should work more closely with researchers, three other members did not agree that this was necessary to ensure presentations meet with the Board’s requirements. Two members commented that the “present practice is satisfactory” and the “Secretariat works very well with the researchers in this way”. One member emphasized that additional assistance may result in researchers tending to “offload the critical thinking required in making successful presentations”.

4.0 Priorities for the REB

The board members provided mixed feedback about whether the REB needs to devote more time to policy development. Four members expressed that it was not necessary. One member emphasized that “care should be taken not to distract attention at meetings from serving investigators’ interests”. Another member suggested that “policy direction could be set in conjunction with the Chief Scientist’s Office”.

Four members expressed that more time should be devoted to policy development, commenting “Board members should be active participants in ongoing policy development/revision. It should be a regular part of our agenda.” Two members emphasized the urgent nature of focusing on policy issues.

The following areas were identified as priorities for the REB in the area of policy development:

- Clarification of what needs to be reviewed by Health Canada
- Criteria for expedited review
- Receipt of and response to adverse incident reports
- Appeal procedures
- Compliance and monitoring of researchers
- Jurisdictional and responsibility issues
- Address distinctive aspects of epidemiological studies
- Up to date information about privacy issues/legislation
- International research initiatives

5.0 Impact

Board members were asked their opinions about key impacts, efficiency and effectiveness of the Board, and appreciation of the contribution of the Board.

5.1 Key impacts

Board members identified the following key impacts for the Health Canada Research Ethics Board:

- Sensitizing researchers to ethical concerns (3)
- Protecting research participants (2)
- Ensuring a high standard of ethics of all research in which Health Canada is involved
- Enhancing the quality and credibility of research

It should be noted that one board member emphasized that “when HC’s REB is the only IRB involved in assessing a study, it is most useful. When prior IRB approval has been obtained elsewhere, HC’s REB adds little.”

5.2 Efficiency and effectiveness of the Board

The following recommendations were identified as a means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Board:

- Clarifying what has to be reviewed by the Board (3), for example:
 - It is not important to have HCREB approval when HC staff is not the principal investigator and IRB approval has been granted elsewhere
 - Expedited review does not need to go to the full Board, just the Chair
- Protocols should be complete prior to submission for approval
- Provide a minimum of one week to review protocol
- Conduct periodic assessments such as the Board survey and self-assessments
- The appointment of supplementary members to ensure quorum availability



5.3 Appreciation

Seven board members responded “yes” when asked if they felt that the Department appreciates their efforts as a volunteer on the Health Canada Research Ethics Board (Note: one member did not answer the question). In their comments, members reiterated their satisfaction commenting, “the Department clearly communicates its appreciation”, “resources supplied to the Secretariat demonstrate that the work of the Board is valued”, and “this has been a satisfactory and positive experience for me”. One board member stressed that there are different types of HC staff/volunteers and some members actually lose income because of their volunteer work. This respondent emphasized that all REB members need to be recognized for their contribution.

6.0 Conclusion

Overall, the board members provided extremely positive feedback about their experiences as members of the Health Canada Research Ethics Board. They appeared to be very satisfied with their role as board members and extremely pleased with the work of the Secretariat. Areas of agreement, areas of variability and future directions are summarized below.

6.1 Areas of agreement

The majority of board members were in agreement that:

- Meetings are planned in accordance with the needs of the workload and that the current workload is suitable and warrants monthly meetings
- Travel arrangements are convenient and are made promptly
- Meetings are held at suitable facilities/meeting rooms
- Training for the position and current training opportunities are appropriate
- The Secretariat provides a high level of support
- No additional resources are required
- Researchers’ presentations meet the need for effective and efficient use of time
- It would be helpful to inform the Board of initiatives and issues arising in HC regarding research ethics
- The REB approval process has a key impact on research
- Board members are appreciated for their efforts as volunteers

The favourable results indicate that the Secretariat should continue its high quality efforts in the areas of meeting arrangements and facilities, training, protocol preparation, support and appreciation of board members.

6.2 Areas of variability

Some variability of responses was evident regarding:

- The geographic location of meetings
- Training received to perform the responsibilities
- The availability of translations (e.g., for videoconferencing, documents)
- The need for videoconferencing
- Additional expenses (e.g., staying in touch with one's job)
- The need to work more closely with researchers
- Devoting more time to policy development
- Recognizing the contributions of all types of volunteers

Most of the above issues were raised by one or two board members. Two areas, however, were the subject of much greater variability: the need for videoconferencing and the need to devote more time to policy development. The results suggest that it may be useful to present these two areas to the Board for further discussion.

6.3 Future Direction

The board members identified a variety of suggestions in the following areas:

- Further training initiatives
- Ways of improving the service
- Priorities for the REB in the area of policy development
- Ways to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the Board

The initiatives and improvements identified by the Board can provide the Secretariat with a useful guide for discussion about the future direction of the REB.