
The problem of proliferation

In the previous edition of *Research Ethics Review*, Aldridge, Medina and Ralphs of the University of Manchester presented useful guidance on minimizing the risks with transmission and storage of qualitative data [1]. However, by conflating security and anonymization, the authors may have unwittingly added to the confusion among ethics reviewers and researchers about the handling of qualitative data, a matter which we considered in a recent article in this journal [2]. The ‘problem of proliferation’ is not only with data but with the mixture of messages given to researchers in applying for study approval.

In their introductory paragraph, the authors referred to recent scandals of personal information being lost by Government departments. The lessons to be drawn from such aberrations did not include destroying the databases, but indicated tightening of security procedures. Aldridge and colleagues give timely warning that as digital recording has become the norm, multiple copies of interviews may be produced, stored on portable memory devices, and transmitted by e-mail, raising risks of data being lost or passing into the wrong hands. We fully support encryption, but disagree with the deletion of original data, as the ethics committee of the University of Manchester apparently demands.

Transcripts are not a direct copy of audio-recordings or video-recordings, but a stage in analysis, being the electronic or paper document on which the researcher performs coding. As longer-serving ethics committee members will have witnessed, qualitative methodology has made tremendous progress in establishing its place in healthcare research, overcoming scepticism about its scientific rigour. Although subjective experience lies in a different paradigm from

objective observation in the study of health, illness and clinical treatment, a systematic and robust enquiry should apply. As an important aspect of this discipline, qualitative researchers should preserve an audit trail from data collection to findings. Destruction of original data would not only preclude revisiting of material by the research team, but would leave qualitative research open to bias and possibly fraud. Once a recording is destroyed, there is no guarantee that the analysed version of an interview or focus group was complete and accurate. An unscrupulous researcher would be able to pursue their own agenda, omitting inconvenient perspectives, or even fabricating data to suit.

While recommending anonymization of transcripts, Aldridge and colleagues acknowledged the difficulties in this task. Some researchers aim to delete identifying detail, which is usually taken to mean proper nouns. However, qualitative data are inherently contextual, with participants often describing relationships and events, and the meaningfulness of such data can easily be reduced by a misplaced ethical zeal. Take for example this fictitious segment of data:

Dr Smith told me to stay away from Joe and them others. They’re just junkies, coming here to save their benefits and thinking they own the place. The police came to the ward last week, and that tall geez who’s always dishing out weed got threatened with discharge.

We would challenge ethics committees to apply a consistent anonymization strategy to such obviously sensitive data. One could easily end with nothing to analyse, thus wasting the participant’s time. Also, there are major practical difficulties in enforcing the arbitrary removal of identifying details from transcripts. Ethics committees and R&D departments of NHS trusts cannot be expected to police such a ruling, potentially creating an institutionalized pretence. We would prefer that researchers commit to data security and confidentiality of output, rather than telling them to delete their potentially valuable data.

From **NIALL McCRAE** and **JOANNA MURRAY**
Kings College, London, UK

References

1. Aldridge J, Medina J, Ralphs R. The problem of proliferation: guidelines for improving the security of qualitative data in a digital age. *Res Ethics Rev* 2010; 6(1): 3-9.
2. McCrae N, Murray J. When to delete recorded qualitative research data. *Res Ethics Rev* 2008; 4(2): 76-77.