Audit or research?

Editor – The anonymous attack on the integrity of Acupuncture In Medicine reported in the June 2004 issue was both surprising and worrying, particularly when taken in conjunction with the BMJ of 31 July which arrived on my doorstep soon after our own Journal. The BMJ issue was the last of Dr Richard Smith, their editor retiring after 25 years. He chose to devote much of his final issue to articles complaining of the increasing and unnecessary assault course to be run for ethical committee approval in even the most simple of medical research projects. The current 68 page application form is reputed to take over 40 hours to complete (a full working week for a medical secretary) at considerable financial cost. The BMJ contributors were clearly of the opinion that the administrative burden was stifling research, and their leader writer noted that since audit studies are still relatively unregulated ‘much research is now conveniently rebadged as audit’. If these considerations are affecting research into mainstream subjects in reasonably well funded university departments, how much more so will they stifle acupuncture research which is almost invariably conducted on a shoestring?

Despite definitions aimed at clarifying the difference, the division between research and audit is in practice far from distinct. Likewise, some of that which goes under the guise of ethical control is in reality imposed by an administrative fear of legal complaint, however unjustified. I very much hope that the publicity in the BMJ will indeed result in simplification of ethical committee approval with a concentration on truly ethical issues. Meanwhile I think it is important that journals impose no additional administrative burden in this area beyond that already required nationally.

Quite clearly any ‘rebadging’ as audit that can legitimately be achieved should be encouraged if this will enable under-funded authors to re-engage in research. Nonetheless this must not be allowed to affect the rigour with which clinical investigations are carried out. I have often been treated to audit presentations in my own hospitals which are effectively poorly planned and controlled research projects from which no legitimate conclusions are possible. That they are accepted uncritically and are allowed to influence departmental policy is a shame. This suggests that in the long run we need much greater quality control for audit and much less ‘ethical’ interference for research. The balance is unlikely to be achieved easily, but a flexible approach by ethical committees and editors is essential to prevent the suppression of that spirit of enquiry that we value so much as readers of Acupuncture in Medicine.

Reference list
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