Ethics before Evidence: The Essential Role of IERB Approval in Research Integrity

In medical research, where new ideas and discoveries enhance our understanding of life, ethical principles must come before evidence. The Institutional Ethical Review Board (IERB) upholds ethical standards, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge never compromises human dignity and moral responsibility. Every researcher must first seek the approval of IERB, not as a formality, but as an essential step toward responsible and credible research.[1]

The idea of ethical review boards is not new. Its roots traced back to the mid-20th century, when the world was confronted with the horrifying violations of human rights during unethical experiments in medicine and science. The Nuremberg Code in 1947 and later the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964 marked the beginning of global awareness about the need to protect research participants.[2] Over time, countries and institutions developed their own frameworks to ensure ethical oversight, and the concept of IERB was created as an institutional mechanism to protect participants, promote ethical standards, and uphold research credibility.

The IERB serves several important functions. Its main task is to review research proposals involving human or animal subjects before the work begins. The board evaluates whether the study design respects the rights, safety, and well-being of participants. It examines issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, risk–benefit balance, and scientific justification. By doing so, it ensures that researchers follow established ethical principles, including respect for autonomy, beneficence, and justice. Another important function is continuous monitoring. Approval is not the end of the process; researchers must keep the IERB informed about progress, changes, or any adverse events during the study. This ongoing review helps maintain transparency and accountability throughout the research process.[3]

The composition of the IERB is also crucial. Generally, it includes members from diverse backgrounds: scientists, clinicians, social scientists, legal experts, and community representatives. This diversity allows for balanced decision-making. Including the members from the community ensures that research remains in public interest rather than limited to academic perspectives. Such a mix strengthens the credibility of IERB decisions and helps maintain public trust in the research process.[1]

The IERB approval is extremely important. It not only protects participants but also safeguards researchers and institutions from ethical violations that could harm their reputation and invalidate their findings. Ethical approval indicates to the academic world that a study has been reviewed with fairness, transparency, and respect for ethical norms. In today's globalized research environment, journals, funding agencies, and universities all recognize IERB clearance as a prerequisite for legitimate and publishable work. Without it, research risks being viewed as unreliable or unethical, regardless of its scientific merit.[4]

However, the path forward requires continuous improvement. IERBs in many institutions, particularly in developing countries, still face challenges such as limited training, lack of resources, and delays in review processes. There is a need to strengthen ethical awareness among researchers through workshops and formal education. Institutions should also ensure that IERBs operate independently. Digital submission systems, clear communication channels, and transparency in decision-making can make the process smoother and more researcher-friendly. Most importantly, teaching ethics should not just focus on following rules but should help researchers think deeply about what is right.

In short, the IERB is more than a regulatory body, it is the a guide for ethical conduct of research. Its approval shows that research is carried out with a sense of moral responsibility. As science advances and boundaries expand, the role of ethical oversight becomes even more vital. By keeping ethics before evidence, the research community ensures that knowledge serves humanity with integrity, compassion, and respect.

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