

Serving on an IRB

Every day, medical research helps save and improve the quality of life for countless people. But the heroes behind medical research aren't just the scientists working to treat and prevent healthcare problems. They're the everyday people who step up to say, "I can help."

Among those heroes are the so-called "public members" who serve on the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) that oversee all clinical trials. IRBs are independent committees whose job is to review, approve and monitor trials.

All IRBs share the same mission: to protect research volunteers and make sure a clinical trial adheres to high ethical and scientific standards. IRBs only approve trials if the potential benefits outweigh the foreseen risks, and if the rights of research volunteers – particularly vulnerable participants, such as prisoners, pregnant women, mentally disabled persons – are protected.

An IRB is responsible for reviewing everything from a study's protocols and informed consent form to its advertising with the express purpose of protecting volunteers. For example, an IRB will decide issues such as whether the use of a placebo in a trial is ethical or whether would-be volunteers might be unduly influenced by a certain level of monetary compensation. The IRB must also review and approve the consent form to make sure it is clear and comprehensive. The IRB serves as the overseeing body and the volunteers' advocate throughout the course of the study.

The federal government requires every clinical trial to have an IRB that consists of at least five members. Members must include at least one scientist, a non-scientist, such as a lawyer, religious leader or academic professor, and a "public member" who is not connected with any institution or sponsor related to the trial.



The public member's role is to bring a lay person's perspective to the board and serve as the voice of the community. As lay people, they aren't tied to the research institutions conducting the trials and aren't interested in solving scientific riddles. Rather, their job is to ask the questions and raise the concerns that members of the community might raise. If a lay member of the IRB can't understand a scientific concept in a protocol or finds the description of possible side effects confusing, chances are a research volunteer would have the same problem. By voicing those concerns, public members represent and safeguard research participants.

Serving as a member of an IRB is a big time commitment. The typical IRB at a university or hospital meets every other week and meetings can last for two or three hours. Some IRBs pay their community members to attend meetings, while others allow community members to participate via conference call. In addition to meetings, IRB members must spend a lot of time reviewing study protocols and consent forms.

Despite the demands, individuals who serve as public members of IRBs say it's gratifying to know their efforts keep study participants safe, while helping facilitate medical breakthroughs.

If you'd like to find an IRB near you, visit the Office for Human Research Protection's website and search their database:

<http://ohrp.cit.nih.gov/search/search.aspx>.