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Include medical ethics in the Research Excellence Framework

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LETTERS

MEDICAL ETHICS

Include medical ethics in the Research Excellence Framework

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The Research Excellence Framework of the Higher Education Funding Council for England is taking place in 2013, its three key elements being outputs (65% of the profile), impact (20%), and “quality of the research environment” (15%). Impact will be assessed using case studies that “may include any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia that has taken place during the assessment period.”¹

Medical ethics in the UK still does not have its own cognate assessment panel—for example, bioethics or applied ethics—unlike in, for example, Australia. Several researchers in medical ethics have reported to the Institute of Medical Ethics that during the internal preliminary stage of the Research Excellence Framework several medical schools have decided to include only research that entails empirical data gathering. Thus, conceptual papers and ethical analysis will be excluded.

The arbitrary exclusion of reasoned discussion of medical ethics issues as a proper subject for medical research unless it is based on empirical data gathering is conceptually mistaken. “Empirical ethics” is, of course, a legitimate component of medical ethics research, but to act as though it is the only legitimate component

suggests, at best, a partial understanding of the nature of ethics in general and medical ethics in particular. It also mistakenly places medicine firmly on only one side of the science/humanities “two cultures” divide instead of in its rightful place bridging the divide.

Given the emphasis by the General Medical Council on medical ethics in properly preparing “tomorrow’s doctors,” we urge medical schools to find a way of using the upcoming Research Excellence Framework to highlight the expertise residing in their ethicist colleagues. We are confident that appropriate assessment will reveal work of high quality that can be shown to have social and cultural impact and benefit beyond academia, as required by the framework.^{1 2}

Competing interests: None declared.

1 Higher Education Funding Council for England. Decisions on assessing research impact. www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/pubs/2011/01_11/.

2 Watts G. Academic medicine: beyond the impact factor. *BMJ* 2009;338:b553.

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