

Should research ethics committees meet in public?

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ABSTRACT

Currently, research ethics committees (RECs) in the UK meet behind closed doors—their workings and most of the content of their decisions are unavailable to the general public. There is a significant tension between this current practice and a broader societal presumption of openness. As a form of public institution, the REC system exists to oversee research from the perspective of society generally. An important part of this tension turns on the kind of justification that might be offered for the REC system. In this paper I adapt Daniels and Sabin's accountability for reasonableness model for just resource allocation to the research ethics context to provide some structural legitimacy and to enable progress on the question of openness. After considering the consequences of adopting this model for open REC meetings, I then examine

some reasons that might be offered against open meetings. These arguments do not overwhelm the core intuitions behind the presumption of openness but they do, I suggest, give us reason to retreat from fully public meetings. I conclude that there should be important adjustments to the system towards public accountability and that there are grounds for stopping short of fully public meetings.