

During my three years of service on the Arizona State University IRB, the following case proved to be the most problematic for the 21-member committee, and resulted in a three hour discussion.

Several years ago at the U.S. Master's Golf Tournament in Augusta, GA, Australian professional golfer Greg Norman entered the final round on Sunday with a six stroke lead over his competitors, blew the lead, and lost the tourney. In the aftermath of the tournament, NBC television execs wondered if anyone had ever done research on "choking," and the commissioned an underling to find the answer. The underling discovered, sure enough, a young Assistant Professor at North Carolina State had done such research, so they tried to contact her, and then learned that she had moved to Exercise Science at Arizona State University. Her prior study had involved an experimental and control group, putting from distances of six feet and 12 feet on a putting green. The experiment involved a small amount of deception, however, because for one group a woman dressed as a nurse pricked the fingers of the individuals in one group, and drew a small blood sample, immediately prior to the putting. The blood was never analyzed. This was just their way of trying to produce higher tension or anxiety for the putters, to see if they would "choke," and thus produce statistically significant bad putting results from those two distances. The NBC television executives found this enticing, and proposed to the young Exercise Science Assistant Professor, that they would subsidize a modified replication of this experiment, and indeed, NBC would even contribute some tall TV equipment towers beside the green, some genuine TV equipment, and some TV personnel to "tape" the putting trials, again, all intended to increase the anxiety or pressure of the experimental situation.

Well, this experiment may sound fairly innocent itself, and indeed in the early rounds of the discussion hardly a soul on the 21 member panel voiced any objections to the actual experimental protocol. But eventually it occurred to someone that this situation had the potential of having millions of TV viewers learn that Arizona State University was the kind of "Research One" university which would allow the philistines to call or influence its research agenda. This would create bad public relations for ASU, and its image as a serious scientific place would be compromised. Even among this carefully picked snoremongering group of company men and company women (this author excepted of course), proto-ironicists pointed out that we had already provided the mass media with several dozens of scandals which surely dwarfed this innocent little putting experiment (football coaches pummeling college players on national TV, professors running whore houses in downtown Phoenix, embezzlement of almost \$200K at the School of Business Ethics Institute, Biology Professors running Ecstasy labs, and so on, and so on), these arguments did not carry the day. And the putting experiment was axed because of its potential to convey bad publicity about Arizona State University. Do I really have to say how I voted?

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