

University faculty advisors have become reluctant to encourage their students to choose a clinical sample for their thesis or dissertations, for fear that the lengthy IRB approval process may unduly prolong their students' course of studies. At our facility, the five theses and three dissertations completed in the 1987-1996 span stand in stark contrast to the single thesis proposal reviewed since 1996, which did not result in approval. Similarly, many of the hospital-based clinicians, who are also experienced researchers, have become hesitant to encourage their supervisees (psychiatry and law or psychology fellows, psychiatry residents, psychology interns, and others) to initiate research projects that they may not be able to complete by the end of their training year.

Even university-based scholars who do not depend on the labor of students or clinical trainees for their research are discouraged by the review process. One prominent scholar decided to abandon a most worthy, well-funded project, despairing of getting the IRB to approve the protocol, which entailed only clinical interviews with forensic patients and no intervention. Reports of such misfortunes spread quickly in the hospital. As a consequence, talented clinicians who have limited research experience have come to view the idea of turning their clinical insights into systematic research as a lofty, unattainable goal.

The current challenges of obtaining IRB approval have exerted adverse effects on forensic research and on forensic practice. Although obtaining IRB approval in any branch of medicine has become more difficult, few have experienced the squelching that forensic psychiatric research has seen. The field risks stagnation because it may come to lack the benefits of novel research findings as the IRB approval process becomes lengthier, more cumbersome, and more exacting. Everyone loses in the process. Patients lose the potential benefits of innovation and of improved methods of assessment and treatment, as do clinicians, who also lose the professional and intellectual benefit of scholarly work. Departments of Mental Health throughout the country also suffer from this loss. In the end, citizens receive a smaller return on their taxes in the form of less effective forensic services.