Chapter 11
Ethical Issues in Multicenter/Multisite Studies

Introduction

Multicenter studies, which are relatively common in the context of HIV research, may be advantageous for various reasons. Because multicenter studies are conducted at multiple sites, the external validity and, consequently, the generalizability of the findings may be enhanced (Weinberger et al., 2001). Multicenter studies also enhance our ability to investigate diseases or exposures of interest that are of low incidence because they permit enrollment of a larger number of study participants than could be achieved through reliance on one site alone. For instance, investigators may wish to examine specific sequelae of HIV infection that may be of relatively low incidence among HIV-infected individuals. A multicenter study increases the likelihood that a sample size will be achieved that is sufficiently large to assure statistical power. Too, multicenter studies permit enrollment to occur at a faster rate, potentially reducing the costs and logistical difficulties that may be associated with a lengthier recruitment period.

However, multicenter/multisite studies also give rise to numerous ethical challenges because they are often conducted across diverse locales, cultures, and political boundaries. The operationalization of informed consent may be particularly difficult, due to varying definitions of autonomy and difficulties associated with reliance on interpreters. Additional issues may be confronted due to differing applications of the concept of vulnerability across sites, resulting in differing standards for the protection of the vulnerable persons; varying confidentiality protections across sites due to differences in legal provisions that prevail or concerns that arise at each site; and inconsistencies in the demands of the various local ethics review committees at the participating sites. Unfortunately, relatively few of these issues have been addressed as they apply to multicenter studies in the specific context of HIV-related research. Accordingly, the discussion of each of these topics that follows draws on literature from outside of the HIV context. The case study by Lounbury and colleagues that follows this chapter highlights many of the ethical concerns that may arise in conducting multi-site HIV-related research.
Informed Consent

The informed consent of each individual is a prerequisite to their enrollment in research. This requirement derives from the principle of respect for persons, first enunciated in the Nuremberg Code. The consent must reflect the presence of four elements: adequate information, understanding of that information, the capacity to consent, and the voluntary nature of that consent. Accordingly, the information must be communicated in a manner and language that are appropriate to the prospective participant.

Defining Personhood

The concept of autonomy may differ across locales, rendering it more difficult to decide who must be involved in the informed consent process and whose consent to participate must be sought. Unlike the United States’ concept of personhood, which tends to view individuals as completely autonomous decisionmaking agents, other societies may define persons in the context of their relationships with others and as a part of a larger, related network. In these contexts, the investigator may be required to obtain the consent of local leaders or family elder in addition to that of the individual. Barry (1988: 1083) noted in his discussion of AIDS research in Africa that “Personhood is defined by one’s tribe, village, or social group.” Similarly, Loue and colleagues (1996: 49) observed that civil law in Uganda provides that an eighteen-year-old male living at home has a legal right to make his own decisions. Customary law, however, dictates that the son obtain his father’s consent prior to entering any obligation. Women . . . often refuse to make a decision regarding their own participation or their child’s participation absent the consent of their partner.

It is critical, then, that investigators be cognizant of and integrate into the informed consent process provisions and procedures that adequately integrate such concepts of personhood and autonomy.

Providing Information and Ensuring Understanding

Multicenter studies conducted across different cultures and language groups may be difficult because the prospective participants may speak a language that is different from that of the investigative team, or their ability to communicate in the language of the investigators may be limited. These problems may be ameliorated, to an extent, through the use of interpreters, who the investigators may rely on both to communicate the information related to participation and to obtain consent to participate. However, difficulties may continue to exist due to the inability to translate equivalent expressions from one language to another, the omission or erroneous substitution of terms that may result from attempts to paraphrase material, and variations in the prospective participants’ understanding of terms used by the interpreters.