

The Ethics of Epidemiological Research
Protection of Research Subjects
Capron

Epidemiological research seldom risks direct harm to subjects, it may still hurt them if it invades their interests (privacy) or treats them merely as means to an end. Review by an IRB (Institutional Review Board) is justified if it improves the benefit to risk ratio (if they review is and find ways to increase the ratio). In most circumstances, informed consent should be obtained, in advance, from subjects. This improves the quality of research, promotes the subject's autonomy, regularizes the relationship of investigators and potential subjects, and protects the subject's privacy. Linking sensitive data to specific subjects can result in social and psychological harm. There are certain circumstances that permit alternatives to the usual consent rules: omitting the purpose of a study to avoid biasing the results (which anti-smoking program works best / do you smoke?), omitting consent altogether (study info comes from public records), and identifying potential subjects through records before contacting them for further study (HIV status after testing by US military). Remember to minimize breaches of privacy and confidentiality.