

SEMINAR ON PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Introduction

At the 2013 World Statistics Congress in Hong Kong, a Seminar on Professional Ethics was held. It was organised by the ISI Advisory Board on Ethics (ABE) and chaired by the Mr Dennis Trewin, then chair of the ABE. The presentations can be obtained through links in this message.

Program

The program for the Seminar is outlined below.

1. The ISI Code of Professional Ethics (Presenter - Dennis Trewin, Chair ISI Advisory Board on Ethics [presentation](#))
2. Codes of Practice – International and National. Do they work? (Presenter - Ron Wasserstein, Executive Director, American Statistical Association [presentation](#))
3. Issues around data access including getting the balance right between data access and confidentiality (Presenters – Alan Karr, Director, National Institute of Statistical Sciences on research data sets [presentation](#); Dennis Trewin on survey data sets [presentation](#))
4. Ethical Practices when undertaking studies on sensitive topics or there is potential harm to the participants in the study (Presenter – Benjamin French, Associate Professor, Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania [presentation](#))

Discussion

The discussion was wide-ranging and only some of the discussion issues are mentioned below.

Ethical principles are a way of thinking about what to do and that there will sometimes be conflicts between principles. However, the principles provide a framework for resolving those conflicts. It is generally useful to discuss the conflicts with others before making a judgement on what to do.

There was a discussion of how to promote the ethical principles among those who use statistical services to increase trust in statisticians. There was no common view except it was recognised that international and statistical associations had a responsibility to promote statisticians and their usefulness and trustworthiness when the opportunity arose. Some national organisations (eg Statistical Society of Australia) had materials ready to use for these purposes.

During the discussion it was mentioned that the African Statistical Charter was a good example of trans-national agreement that had led to increased confidence in official statistics in many African countries.

Perhaps the most interesting discussion was around informed consent. There was general agreement that it was essential for data collection but there would be some variation in how it was implemented depending on the type of data. At one end of the spectrum, small research studies where there was some risk to participants requires fully informed consent with opt out provisions during the course of the study. Signed consent forms would be the normal modus operandi. However, for surveys on non-sensitive topics that involve many respondents, completion of the survey form could be taken as informed consent as long as they are made clearly aware of the

purpose of the survey, confidentiality provisions, etc. The underlying principle should be transparency.

Another discussion was around the availability of data sets to third parties. On one hand, data could be regarded as the legitimate intellectual responsibility of organisations that have created the data even if funded by the Government or someone else. On the other hand, it could be argued that data created using public funding should be a public good. The majority view is there should be some sharing of data to support reproducibility and increase the value extracted from the cost of undertaking the data collection. However, any sharing of data should comply with legal constraints and any promises made to the data subjects. The potential of harm to the data subjects should be another consideration.

An emerging issue that needs to be addresses is the responsibility for data obtained from third parties. The advent of big data makes it particularly important to develop specific principles.