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Translating ethics: researching public health and medical practices in Nepal.

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Abstract

Conducting anthropological research into situations where public health interventions are ongoing raises a number of complex ethical issues. This paper addresses this by focusing on recent debate around questions of informed consent in research situations into health care in the 'developing' world. Two issues are developed: firstly, that of anthropological engagement with medical research trials; and secondly, how medical ethics debates have impinged upon and influenced anthropological ideas of ethics. Drawing on personal anthropological research into the implementation of the WHO prescribed tuberculosis control programme (DOTS) in the context of Nepal, I outline a number of ethical dilemmas and issues that arose. This research context included other ongoing research into DOTS implementation, as well as the local culture of health care provision. It involved moving between a number of sites and subject positions while interacting with health professionals and patients. In conclusion, rather than prescribing ethical norms for researchers in such situations, I argue that we need more ethnographic examples and case studies as a means of thinking through the issues. I suggest that we need to reflect on both the ethical issues that arise when undertaking research into multifaceted public health interventions and into the situations where ethical guidelines and stipulations are formulated. The best place for this may be the Internet, where we increasingly see the conditions emerging for open dialogue.

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