

Response to the German Medical Journal (Ärzteblatt)

Statement on the article “Ethics Consultation for Non-Medical Research Involving Humans Is Becoming Increasingly Important” (Ärzteblatt, November 15, 2024)¹

The article in the “Politics” section of the German Medical Journal (Ärzteblatt) on November 15, 2024, has elicited both significant interest and considerable dismay from us, the spokespersons of the Network for Ethics Committees in the Social Sciences (NEKS). While we agree with the observation that the demand for research ethics consultation is increasing in many research fields outside of medicine, the problem description presented in the article reveals an insufficient understanding of the ethical debates and developments in these disciplines. Particularly troubling is the conclusion that the development of standards for other disciplines should fall under the purview of medical ethics—a notion that is neither factually grounded nor professionally justified. In the following, we outline the aspects of the article that we find especially problematic:

1. **Research *with* humans, not *on* humans**

The term “research on humans” (“Forschung am Menschen”) falls significantly short in describing social science research. Instead, it involves research *with* humans. This is not merely a linguistic nuance but an epistemological and methodological distinction that aligns with a specific scientific ethos. This perspective influences how research is designed, conducted, and reflected upon—ethical questions in the social sciences, therefore, cannot be addressed using the same criteria as in medicine. Mandating ethical approval for all research involving humans, as required by the medical profession’s code of conduct, is not appropriate in the social sciences.

2. **Research ethics is not the monopoly of medical ethics**

The article gives the impression that only medical ethicists deal with research ethics issues. However, virtually all disciplines that conduct research with humans—whether social sciences, humanities, ethnology, or psychology—have vibrant and often decades-long debates on research ethics. While the discourses of medical ethics are indeed referenced, they are not automatically prioritized or universally applicable in these fields. Ethical questions are framed, evaluated, and discussed differently depending on the discipline.

3. **Recognition of the diversity of disciplinary research traditions**

The diverse research styles, traditions, and contexts across disciplines require tailored and appropriate approaches. While the Declaration of Helsinki is central to medical research, it is less relevant or even inapplicable in other contexts. The uniform application of medical standards to other disciplines is neither practical nor respectful of their unique characteristics and requirements.

¹ <https://www.aerzteblatt.de/nachrichten/155721/Ethikberatung-bei-nicht-medizinischer-Forschung-am-Menschen-wird-immer-wichtiger>

4. **Autonomy of the disciplines**

The social sciences and humanities have long developed and implemented their own approaches to research ethics—be it through ethical review processes, discipline-specific guidelines, principles for ensuring good scientific practice, or ethical reflexivity and discussion. The (further) development of standards in social science disciplines is carried out within these fields themselves (see RatSWD 2017). A working group of the Bundesärztekammer (German Medical Association) and the Arbeitskreis medizinischer Ethikkommissionen (AKEK) (Network of medical research ethics committees) to develop standards for non-medical disciplines is not a productive solution. Instead, it is essential to respect the diversity of perspectives and acknowledge the autonomy of each discipline.

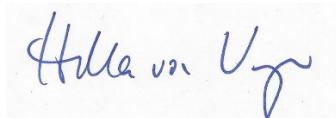
5. **Uniform review quality?**

The article suggests that only adherence to the Declaration of Helsinki ensures uniform review quality in ethical approvals within medical contexts, which funding institutions and publication outlets could consider a given. However, we argue that merely prescribing guidelines does not ensure their adherence or consistent interpretation in ethical reviews. Furthermore, the literature indicates that variability in the decisions of different ethics committees is also present in medicine.

6. **Looking ahead: Dialogue instead of one-sidedness**

Research ethics thrives on dialogue. Medical ethicists, too, can learn from the ethical debates and practices of other disciplines—and vice versa. Only through mutual openness and exchange among disciplines can research ethics as a whole continue to evolve.

It is high time to recognize and respect the particularities and independence of non-medical research disciplines. A constructive dialogue on equal footing is indispensable for this purpose.



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