**Poor ethics cost us a lot more than you think!**

By Ashley Smith - Content and Communications Manager, Infonetica Ltd

Global corruption costs around 5% of GDP – that’s £1.8 trillion. A large enough pile of fivers to reach over 40,000 km – nearly five-times the height of Mt Everest! This alarming figure has been bandied about in the press but it really only scratches the surface…

If you widen the net to include all unethical conduct, then we are probably talking closer to the GDP of China. A stack reaching one-third of the way to the moon.

Think I’m exaggerating? Then read on…

It’s easy to become immune to ethical scandals, but life wasn’t always like that. Nowadays ethical scandals are rather like busses – you wait for ages and then loads come along at once.

* Banking…
* Care Homes…
* Football…
* Athletics…
* Tennis…
* Refugees…
* Mental Health…

The list gets longer and more all-encompassing every day.

The effects of corruption on society are well understood. It stands in the way of democracy and the rule of law; it depletes a country's wealth, often diverting it to corrupt officials' pockets and, at its core, it puts an imbalance in the way that business is done, enabling those who practise corruption to win.

But ethics mean different things to different people.

The most useful definition I’ve come across is that ethics describes the moral compass that should sit behind and alongside the law. The trouble with compasses is that they tend to point in different directions depending on where you stand – that’s why you need the law. You can have ethics without law but you should never have law without ethics.

The **healthcare sector** probably has the longest formal history of ethics and, as a result, some of the most effective ways of dealing with them.

Medical trials can be an ethical minefield. A succession of post-war ethical codes culminated in the [Good Clinical Practice](https://www.whitehalltraining.com/all-good-clinical-practice-gcp-training-courses-online) rules that govern all well-run trials throughout the world. Putting what should be a moral imperative – the protection of the patient – into a defined code.

Trials are subject to stringent ethical review before they even take place and computerised systems have been developed specifically to handle the complex processes involved in guiding an application through ethical review.

All research involving human beings needs an ethical review – because this research varies so much, the ethics review systems need to be flexible and adaptable too.

Deciding on the ethics of a door-to-door opinion poll is a world away from considering trials of invasive surgical techniques – but the principle is the same. The review systems need to be able to tackle both extremes.

Online systems like Infonetica’s [Ethics Review Manager](http://www.infonetica.net/erm) have been developed purely to make these ethical review processes run smoothly.

The **financial sector** is one of the least trusted – with bankers considered by the US public to be just a little more ethical than lawyers. Hence the rise of the ethical investment sector.

Unfortunately, the depth of analysis applied to ethical investments is crude and uneven compared with clinical trials. Industries are often just labelled as good or bad. The difficulty can be in disentangling complex corporate webs to reveal every business interest.

This perception is now changing, with ethical investors increasingly expecting not only that their companies refrain from bad sectors but that they encourage positive behaviour – swapping polluting for green technologies for example. The need for a medical style ethical review seems pressing in the financial sector.

What about **sport scandals**?

Modern sport governing bodies and participants hardly seem to be living up to the Olympian ideal. But even the ancient games turned into a political bargaining tool where alliances were forged or broken – you can’t tell me that there was no match fixing involved.

Sports scandals seem to stretch the entire breadth from high-profile governing bodies like FIFA and state-sponsored doping to novice tennis players throwing matches to supplement their relatively meagre incomes. However, they are all symptoms of the same malaise.

**No clear system of ethics.**

As I said before – law and ethics are far from the same. Most of the examples I’ve given above are illegal and therefore punishable by law – in theory at least.

Where ethics review really comes into its own is where the choice is not between legal and criminal acts, but between right and wrong. Again, this is where other sectors can learn from medical trials.

Take the example of drug trials involving children. Testing anything on children seems morally wrong but what about diseases that predominantly affect the young? It’s no use just testing on adults as children metabolise drugs very differently – you can’t just scale the dose back based on their body weight.

Ethical review enables trial designers to be sure that the risks to participants are minimised and managed. Even an aspect like how the trial is explained, so that participants really understand, is part of the process (informed consent). So with trials involving children, the participant information could be given in pictures, using concepts they will understand, with a more detailed but jargon-free written explanation for their guardians.

Of course, even with ethics systems in place, things can still go wrong – as the recent tragedy in France illustrates. Medical trials will always involve risks, but the point is that the risks are carefully assessed and managed before they happen.

Other sectors of industry have focussed heavily on governance to uphold ethical standards, but by then, the damage can be done.

Isn’t it about time that the rest of the world caught up and developed rigorous ethics review management systems too?

Notes:

**The cost of unethical behaviour –**

The actual value of Chinese GDP is around £6.5 trillion – about three-times the cited value of “corruption.” The Tax Justice Network estimates that tax avoidance (unethical but legal) has been estimated to cost around £1 trillion a year – add this and the total reaches about £3 trillion.

I could go on about the monetary value of human lives lost to dubious ethical practices, companies that have been forced into bankruptcy, falsified research papers that led to costly dead-ends etc. – but I have to admit that I plucked the £6.5 trillion figure out of the air.

Well it’s not like I’ve broken any law is it?

**About Ethics Review Manager** [www.infonetica.net/erm] **–**

Infonetica’s ethics review software is widely used in leading organisations. It is the solution used to manage ethics approval in the UK (IRAS), and has been adopted by regional government and institutions in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA.

Infonetica’s Ethics Review Manager (Ethics RM) is a cost-effective, online system that helps streamline the ethics submission and review process. The software is ready to use out-of-the-box and is flexible enough to be configured to match any process.

Ethics RM streamlines the ethics process and delivers significant productivity gains. Better still, through integrated management, control and communication, Ethics RM can significantly lower Ethics committee/ Institutional Review Board (IRB) administration costs.

**About Infonetica** [www.infonetica.net] –

Infonetica was established in 2003. The company is based in the UK with headquarter offices in Richmond, Surrey, and regional representative offices in North America and Australia. Our products are used in the UK at both national and local levels, and internationally with government and private sector contracts in Europe, US, Canada and Australia.

Infonetica provides a range of clinical research solutions for clinical research management in the areas of ethics review/approval, human tissue tracking along and online compliance training. Our clients represent a broad spectrum of public bodies, private enterprise and research institutions. Our easily adaptable software platforms and flexible pricing means we are able to bring powerful, feature-rich solutions within the reach of organisations both large and small – from single hospital research departments to national/regional services processing thousands of applications annually.

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