ETHICS APPROVAL OF CASE REPORTS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
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Q1: Do case reports require ethics approval?
A: No, not as a general rule BUT if the case report will be used for degree purposes i.e. as material for a thesis or “skripsie” then the Committee for Postgraduate Education (KNO) requires that the report is submitted for ethics review. ALSO, increasingly, journal editors are requiring either ethics approval, or a signed patient consent form before publication.

Q2: If a case report is for degree purposes, what do “ethics review” entail?
A: The following items should be submitted to the Committee for Human Research, by the student:
- A covering letter outlining the rationale for the case report and steps taken to protect patient privacy and confidentiality
- Signed consent from the patient or guardian, or an explanation stating why consent was not obtained. A template consent document (adapted from the consent form required by BMJ Case Reports) for case reports is available at www.sun.ac.za/rdsd/
- The case report or draft article.

Q3: Do I always need to obtain written informed consent from the patient?
A: Yes this is advisable. Case reports can sometimes reveal very personal information of patients that may even possibly lead to their recognition by readers of the report, particularly if photographs are used. Increasingly journal editors are requesting a copy of a signed consent form, before agreeing to publish case reports. A clear justification usually needs to be provided if a case report is submitted for publication without formal and specific written consent from the patient or guardian or in the case of a death, from the next of kin.

Q4: What should I do if I submit a case report to a journal and it gets rejected because I do not have ethics approval?
You can submit the case report to the CHR for review, as described above. The CHR will require evidence that informed consent was obtained from the patient or a valid explanation as to why it was not obtained, as well as an outline of steps taken to protect the patient’s identity.

Q5: Where can I find more information regarding the publication of case reports?
A: A very useful site to visit is that of BMJ Case Reports. Available at http://casereports.bmj.com/ The ethics standards and conditions required by the BMJ can be considered to be “benchmark” standards.