

AN INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION OF THE NEWLY-REVISED DRAFT ISEE ETHICS GUIDELINES: KEY PRINCIPLES, CASE STUDIES, AND APPROACHES TO ETHICAL CHALLENGES

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Background and Aims: The opportunity to positively contribute to the health and well-being of humans is a fundamental tenet of the field of epidemiology. Environmental epidemiologists are responsible for identifying environmental health threats which may have far-reaching implications, including multi-generational effects and global impacts. In order to meet the challenge of protecting public health, it is essential that funders, institutions, and researchers be committed to the pursuit of objective epidemiological evidence in protecting public health, and recognizing forces that subvert or undermine such work. However, there has been a growing threat to the impact and the legitimacy of our research due to increasing pressures and control from political and economic interests. These forces work to shape the research agenda, methodology, reported outcomes, and policy. The ensuing ethics issues add to the spectrum of other ethics challenges posed by research on humans.

Methods: In this presentation, I will discuss the newly-updated ISEE Ethics Guidelines, highlighting modifications that were deemed to reflect issues in the current research climate. One important addition is an invitation to ISEE members to contribute case studies. The Guidelines are organized according to four major areas:

- Obligations to Individuals and Communities Subjected to Research
- Obligations to Society
- Obligations Regarding Funders/Sponsors and Employers
- Obligations to Colleagues

Results: The new draft Guidelines reflect growing concern about conflicting interests; funding of heretofore independent institutions by private industry; political influence on the research agenda; restrictions on the flow of information; informed consent (including international differences regarding authority over decision-making); the fate of bio-specimens; editorial bias; and the implications of improper ("junk") science for public health policy.

Conclusions: The true value of the Ethics Guidelines will rest upon their active incorporation into professional practice, and into the dialogue among all stakeholders.