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## Informed consent - in whose interest?

Mini Symposium in connection with VIII Annual Symposium on  
Biomedicine, Ethics and Society: "*Rethinking Informed Consent: The limits  
of autonomy*"

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Angus Dawson  
Senior Lecturer  
Keele University  
United Kingdom

### **Is informed consent always necessary?**

In this paper I will argue that too much emphasis is placed upon informed consent (IC) in contemporary research ethics. I will outline two reasons for thinking that IC is not always necessary (in the sense of not morally required) in medical research with competent adults.

1. The Ideal/Reality Argument. We have a large amount of empirical evidence suggesting that gaining an informed consent is difficult if not impossible in a research context. I argue that if something is not possible, it makes no sense to *demand* it. Moral requirements need to be attainable in the real world. I argue that this has significant implications for research ethics regulation, and that we need to move away from absolutist formulations of moral rules in research ethics.

2. The Plural Values Argument. The main justification for gaining informed consent is to appeal to respecting the individual's autonomy. However, autonomy is only one value among many. We have no good reason to think we should always give priority to autonomy. Other values are, in the abstract, equally important, and should be given priority over autonomy in at least some circumstances. This argument has implications for our conception of the relevant obligations of members of research ethics committees and their role in protecting research participants from harm.



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