

Title: Studying Vulnerable Individuals

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Description: Mark would like to conduct research for his dissertation at a group home for developmentally disabled persons where he has worked as a social worker for several years.

Headings: Identifying and Managing Conflicts of Interest; Dual roles of researchers

Case Type: Decision making

Studying Vulnerable Individuals

Mark is a social worker who has worked for several years in a large group home for high functioning developmentally disabled persons. He is very good at his job and it shows through the hugs and high-fives he receives while at work.

Mark has decided to pursue his doctorate degree in social work and has chosen a PhD program that specializes in developmental disabilities research. As an unofficial condition of his admission into the prestigious program, Mark proposes an ambitious dissertation to the director. Basing his study on previous research on persons with schizophrenia, he seeks to study the tendency of violent/aggressive behavior in high functioning developmentally disabled individuals as a function of their spatial brain activity and abuse history.

His participants will need to agree to a closed MRI scan and a record review of past physical, mental, and/or sexual abuse. Mark realizes that it is a lot to ask of any research participant, more so with a developmentally disabled individual. Recruitment could be difficult but he is confident that he can achieve sufficient power in his study, by drawing upon his client contacts at the group home. The clients are eager to please Mark, and most wouldn't dream of saying "no" to him. In cases where a legally authorized representative is necessary, Mark has agreed to meet with both the client and the surrogate decision maker to explain the details of the study. Most of the surrogate decision makers are parents of the clients or the group home administrators, who also like Mark as equally as the clients.

Mark and the university argue that although the participation is intensive, the benefits of the study are great as psychopharmacological and counseling therapies could better treat violent behavior in DD individuals. Mark submits his proposal to the IRB, including a comprehensive informed consent form.

As a member of the IRB you learn of Mark's affiliation with the group home. Do you approve the study? Why or why not?