

Abstract

Background

Lack of proper understanding on the part of researchers about public understanding of research and informed consent will increase the potential for malpractice. As a part of a larger study on ethics and informed consent in Sri Lanka, this study aimed to ascertain the level of understanding of 'research' by exploring the views of the public and professionals.

Methods

Convenience sampling and snow ball technique were used for recruitment with an emphasis on balanced age and gender representation, diverse educational, socio-cultural and professional backgrounds, and previous research experience, either as researchers or participants. Content analysis of the data was carried out.

Results

66 persons (37 males, 29 females) participated. Although fundamentally a qualitative study, themes were also quantitatively analysed for informative results. Most participants thought that the word 'research' meant searching, looking, inquiring while some others thought it meant gathering information, gaining knowledge and learning.

A third of participants did not offer an alternative word for research. Others suggested the words survey, exploration, search, experiment, discovery, invention and study as being synonymous. Doctors, health professionals, health institutions, scientists, professionals, businessmen, pharmaceutical companies, students, teachers were identified as people who conduct research.

Participants indicated that crucial information on deciding to participate in research included objectives of the research, project importance and relevance, potential benefits to individuals and society, credibility & legitimacy of researchers, what is expected of participant, reason for selection, expected outcome, confidentiality and ability to withdraw at any time. A majority (89%) expressed their willingness to participate in future research.

Conclusions

The results show that with or without prior experience in research, participants in this study had a reasonable understanding of research. The findings show that a decision about taking part in research is dependent on knowledge, education and also on social networks.

The results demonstrate that the majority were supportive of health research and believe that research is beneficial to the welfare of society.

