



# ELEPHANT

IN THE LAB

INTERVIEW

## Promoting good scientific practice. The Norwegian case.

<b>Short title</b>	Promoting good scientific practice. The Norwegian case.
<b>Long title</b>	Preserving research ethics most importantly is about promoting good scientific practice.
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Director of the Norwegian National Commission for the Investigation of Research Misconduct Annette Birkeland explains, why it is important to promote good research practices by developing guidelines and norms for good research and by advising scientists on ethical dilemmas. The Commission she directs is part of the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees that consists of independent agencies, which treat different ethical aspects in science. They are financed and administered by the Ministry of Science and Education.



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## How would you explain the meaning of research integrity to an early stage researcher?

I think the core meaning of good scientific practice encompasses simply the process of conducting good responsible research. This notion started developing in the 1600s, when science liberated from God, the emperors and any kind of rule. Suddenly, it became something in its own. After that internal rules developed; the rules of autonomy and academic freedom. These norms are still valid today, although researchers keep discussing what freedom is until today. Then you have all this peer-review, references; all these internal norms.

## What does the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees do to promote good scientific practices/research integrity?

A lot of things. We have Committees for different fields of research; they are developing guidelines, which are also codes for good research practice, since the early 90s. Our system has not been so much active in investigating research misconduct, as in many other countries. It is based on building up good practice and establish a culture of good scientific practice. So, we write books about research ethics and different topics in research ethics. WE have our website with cases, discussion. Most importantly, scientists have an opportunity to consult us on their problems and dilemmas. After sending a request we are discussing it in the committees to give a proper answer. The details of the case is published on our website afterwards. In Norwegian, however.

## How do you ensure that researchers read those books and adhere to the guidelines published?

We don't know if they do. This is a good question. Although, in my experience many researchers contact us when battling with dilemmas, so the effect of our work is evident. Even when I talk to Phd students we tend to discuss ethical dilemmas a lot. Mostly you don't have a direct answer right away.



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**As you mentioned, one of the main tasks of the National Research Ethics Committee is to advise researchers on ethical dilemmas. Can you describe the most common dilemmas that occur?**

We deal a lot with financing issues. For example, in Norway the public pays for students to obtain a Phd. If a public institution, as in healthcare or social authorities, can choose a few employees and pay for them getting a Phd. This is kind of a cooperation between the employer - the Norwegian State - and the National research fund. Often these Phd researchers doubt, whether this scheme is coherent with independence and autonomy. Am I really autonomous when I write a Phd thesis and it is about the place I work, for the place I work and financed by the place I work? That's a common dilemma. What is autonomy? When is research really independent?

Another example was an issue of the committee for natural sciences: a petroleum case that happened several years ago. One of the universities asked for the opinion of this committee on how to cooperate with some of the oil companies. So, Statoil (now: Equinor) is financing research; they have different programmes for that. The university was questioning the ethical aspect of conducting such project. In this case, the committee answered that it is ok to have these cooperations under the condition that educational institutions also acknowledge their responsibility to promote sustainability. Accordingly, the ethics committee recommended among other issues that sufficient resources should be spent on environmentally friendly research to ensure that research is not only directed to these oil-financed programs.

**What kind of teaching activities does the Norwegian Ethics Committees provide?**

Mostly, we make presentations at universities, try to foster discussions and writing essays, organise debates. Every university has the responsibility to provide teaching on the issue of ethics in science, so they invite us to present our materials and take part in their courses. Every course can be different and focus on different aspects. Usually we use our own collections of



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IN THE LAB

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materials, powerpoint presentations. We don't have any fancy e-learning programs. We would very much like to develop that, but can't afford it at the moment.

### How can digital technology be of any use to promote good scientific practice?

It's democratising our work, making it available to everyone. Just take simply the fact that researchers can actually read the contributions of national committees on different cases; they all are published on our website. We have a research ethics library, where different cases are presented. So this is how digital technology helps us, even considering that we use it a very old-fashioned way. It's not cutting edge. Still, it makes our work visible and available for everybody. And, of course, in the digital sphere we can compare different aspects of research across borders. Interestingly, research itself is almost always international, but the systems are national and differ from one country to another. For example, in Norway we don't talk about research misconduct. We use the notion research dishonesty; and this is more of a personal label.