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Michael Holtz: Happy Wednesday and welcome to Further Together, the ORAU podcast. I am, as always your host, Michael Holtz, in the communications and marketing Department at ORAU, and I am privileged today to have Susan Erlich as my guest. We are going to be talking about bias, explicit and implicit bias, in the context of federal human subjects research. We will talk more about this, but Susan has written a memorandum that is kind of a brief analysis of bias. It is not kind of. It is a brief analysis of bias. I will let Susan talk more about that. Susan Erlich, welcome to Further Together.

Susan Ehrich: Thank you so very much, Michael.

Michael Holtz: Tell me a little bit about who you are.

Susan Ehrich: I am, for this purpose, a former assistant US attorney, and a former judge on the Arizona Court of Appeals. Actually somewhat relevant is, before I became an attorney, before I went to law school, I worked as an analyst for the US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. Employment section. All of this really led to my career, my interest in political history. What constitutes justice, of which of course, bias is a component.

Susan Ehrich: How this all came about is that Libby White, who is the human subject protection program manager at DOE's Office of Science, and Sherry Hatona Bateman, who's the NSA program manager, they identified a need to evaluate documents that comprise the human subjects protection programs training requirements and forms, to ensure that biases are identified and addressed so that they are not barriers to participation in human subjects research. The two of the, with the enthusiastic support of Jim Morris, who's the chair of both of the Central DOE IRBs, created an implicit bias task force. Comprised of members of the admin team, and the two central IRBs. It was this task force, which after really months of consideration and discussion, and important discussion, wrote a memorandum which addresses bias in drafting the memo. My thoughts were organized into two overlapping parts. The history of human subjects research that led to the Belmont Report, and the very nature of bias.

Susan Ehrich: Because my career and my studies of political history, I particularly appreciated that the Belmont Report was the result of the 1949 Nuremberg code, which itself was the result of the Nazis crime against humanity. Also, the US' shameful Tuskegee syphilis study, right? The Belmont reports three principals.

Michael Holtz: Right.

Susan Ehrich: The Belmont reports three principles, respect for a person's magnificence of justice. Those are implied in any consideration of bias. In drafting the report, and while I may have been the first drafter, I want to make sure that it's understood that every member of the task force had input some amusing, all of it serious, and just a wonderful, wonderful collegiate group. But, being the first author, I was thinking specifically of this history. If you think US history, their first was he incomprehensibly cruel prejudice that permitted the slavery of Africans, which continues as a bias against African Americans. The equally incomprehensible prejudice that caused such devastation to indigenous Americans, a bias that also continues.

Susan Ehrich: Then the prevalence of bias grew as this country grew. Jews, Catholics, Irish, Germans, Italians, Pols, Hispanics, Latino's, the LGBTQ community, et cetera. While we like to think of the US as a melting pot, in the words of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, We're not. We're a mosaic. That became apparent as the task force identified 21 different biases, without pretending that the list is exhausted, as I proved when I just added last week to more biases.

Susan Ehrich: I'm not going to name all 23, but some are with age, authority, beauty, gender, geography, height, language, occupation, political, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity. Some of these are more explicit than others, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age. Some are more implicit. They're less intentional. Of course, what constitutes explicit or implicit bias overlaps. Although everyone has biases, those that are inappropriate can be reduced through the process of recognizing and acknowledging them, which is what was intended that the taskforce do in recommending, drafting this document. Recommending to the admin too, that it be disseminated as an educational tool.

Susan Ehrich: There is the short form version of how I came to be a part of this. Forgetting to mention that I am a member of the Central DOE IRB. But this is how I came to participate and this is what prompted the writing of this memo, which we do hope becomes disseminated as an educational tool for DOE. But, I'll add that I also have taken it, with the approval, permission of the admin team, and have made one version less DOE centric. It does not cite all of the DOE regulations, specifically, and have made it more generic so that we hope that we'll have other uses in other venues.

Michael Holtz: I'm looking at the memo now, and I guess my question for you in terms of looking at this one, as an educational tool, but also is the goal to, in recognizing and identifying either our personal biases or the biases of folks conducting research to try and pull those biases out? To remove the bias, particularly in this case, in the human subjects research?

Susan Ehrich: The intent is that the researchers, the research community, self identify the biases that they have with a view of understanding how the cohort research subjects is selected. It can be something as obvious to someone like me, who lives in the Southwest, as making sure that the community that is most comfortable speaking Spanish be included and provided with a translator. It can be also something that, as an outreach to, for example, the Navajo Nation community. If it is understood or if it's to be considered that the Navajo be included as research subjects.

Susan Ehrich: The Navajo Nation and it's not alone, has its very own IRB that has to be consulted, and if the indigenous community doesn't have an IRB, there are of course, governance structures that ought to be consulted. Then, those are two of the more, shall we say obvious biases.

Michael Holtz: Sure.

Susan Ehrich: There are also what really isn't a bias, but for convenience, is it easier for the principal investigator to simply conduct research among lab employees? Well, of course I'm setting aside any conflicts of interest or matters of potential duress.

Michael Holtz: Sure.

Susan Ehrich: But, we intended that the researchers think globally. I don't like the word "globally." Take that out. Think comprehensively about who the cohort is, who the subjects are, and who the subjects can be. How they can be more inclusive, and therefor more representative of the population. This research, ultimately, is supposed to benefit.

Michael Holtz: And that is such an important issue. Certainly for the department of energy, but for organizations. Not only at the government level, but at the university level, and other research opportunities. I don't know that you and I have ever talked about this Susan, but I'm a cancer advocate. One of our big focuses is on health equity, and particularly equity in clinical trials, because as you said its clinical trials, it might be easy to the people who are say, have access to the hospital setup, and have access to the cancer treatment center. But what about the folks that it's harder to find? Because of where they live, or because of the color of their skin. Whatever of those 23 biases. They don't have the same access to say, a clinical trial that I might, because I have health insurance, and because I know how to get to my cancer treatment center.

Susan Ehrich: I think we're clearly seeing it. I trust that we can learn from COVID. Now, it's seemingly monkeypox that there are whole communities, and any community is significant. But there are communities that raise ethnicity access, socioeconomic status, a variety, who do not have as you well said, access to healthcare. Do not have access to clinical trials. For whom, like everyone else, this research is to be conducted. To help. I mean, that is the entire purpose of research. We're hoping that this is a means by which to make researchers aware of not only their biases with a view of bringing in a diversity of people, but also a way of thinking about what kind of research should be conducted.

Susan Ehrich: Then, also how to bring in these individuals so that there need not be a language barrier. We have discussed how to provide transportation for certain communities who simply cannot come in for research interview or for a clinical trial. Especially if it's one conducted over time.

Michael Holtz: Right. There are methods to, at least to attempt to eliminate some of those biases by providing access in different forms, depending on the situation?

Susan Ehrich: To acknowledge a bias, it goes a significant way in being able to address it. I can think of biases which I hadn't thought of. Maybe it's a certain kind of act set. Maybe it's the geographic location of someone. These are, I find, implicit as one goes through life. How do you regard someone from New York City versus someone you may from Ajo Arizona? Do you give that person more regard? I'm being careful not to name whether I would regard someone from Ajo better or worse than someone from New York City.

Michael Holtz: Right.

Susan Ehrich: But, these are the biases we accrue over time. To go all the way back to one of my mother's favorite sayings from the musical South Pacific, you have to be taught to hate. Hate is not what this addresses, although it can be a result of bias. But, it's a matter of understanding, and that's what we wanted to accomplish.

Michael Holtz: If you can recognize the biases that you may have, hopefully you can litigate them in the research that you're conducting.

Susan Ehrich: Exactly.

Michael Holtz: Excellent. Susan, is there anything I have not asked you about, the memo or about the process that you want to make sure that we discuss?

Susan Ehrich: Well, you could have asked me about all seven pages of it. But, no. Except that we do hope, and this is why there are two versions, the DOE version and the DOE, the less [inaudible 00:18:26] version so that this memo can be helpful to anyone who may have a need of it. I've got to say, it's been a very interesting, intellectually challenging and fun project. Certainly for me, and I think for the taskforce colleagues. Yeah, I'm quite sure of that.

Susan Ehrich: We truly hope that this can open people's eyes to the nature of bias, especially the researchers, and that this will improve the quality of research that is done by DOE.

Michael Holtz: Excellent. Well, that is certainly something we can all endeavor to make sure happens. Susan, thank you so much for spending a little bit of time explaining this memo. The importance of this work. I'm a lay person, but I am highly interested in research and helping me understand. This issue is personally important to me on a number of levels, so I'm glad we could talk about it.

Susan Ehrich: Well, thank you for the opportunity. I truly appreciate it, and I'm hoping that once we expect/hope that the DOE administrative team will adopt this. That it will be widely disseminated so that there can be a link for it to have a greater audience than what DOE provides. We're hoping that ORAU and other such terrific educational institutions will pick it up. But I very much appreciate your invitation to talk about it.

Michael Holtz: Thank you so very much, Susan. I appreciate it.

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