

“Say Yes to everything”: Planning consent for sexual and reproductive health research interviews with Burma born refugees

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Background:

Given differing language and cultural norms, consent to conduct sexual and reproductive health (SRH) research with people from ethnic refugee communities can be problematic. Their willingness to comply with expectations in their new country can leave researchers doubting whether true informed consent has been given. This work reports on a process of voluntary consent for SRH research with Burma born refugees settled in Australia developed following interviews with providers of refugee services (PRS).

Methods:

Participants were 29 PRS including health care professionals (doctors, nurses, midwives), bilingual supporting staff (interpreters, social workers, settlement workers, community liaison officers) and administrative staff (practice managers, reception staff) who provide primary care services to refugees.

Semi-structured interviews covered diverse aspects of SRH consultations with Burma born refugees. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis with two independent researchers reaching consensus on key findings.

Results:

Three themes emerged: a) Inexperience of Western concepts of health b) Importance of individual consent discussions with possible participants c) Need for verification of voluntary participation prior to the interview. Results were used to develop a 3-stage process of consent comprising 1. Community SRH information sessions to introduce concepts of research, voluntary participation and informed consent; 2 Subsequent consent discussions for interested participants without community leaders but with the interpreter of the potential participant’s choice; 3. Verification of consent understanding just prior to the interview.

Conclusion:

Recognition of consent difficulties in SRH research with refugee groups who have minimal sense of agency is the first step in conducting ethical research. The themes

will serve as a useful tool for PRS to manage cross cultural SRH research interactions involving interpreters and participants from refugee backgrounds.

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