Steps for Obtaining Oral Consent to Participate in Research

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The Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) requires that evidence of consent be documented (Article 3.12). In most cases this is accomplished by having research participants sign a written consent form. However, in some situations it is not practical or feasible to obtain signed consent from participants (e.g., when interviewing over the phone or via Skype). There are also situations where it is not advisable to obtain signed consent in order to safeguard the participant’s anonymity (e.g., when interviewing sex workers; when interviewing people who will be describing their criminal activities; when interviewing anyone who desires complete anonymity). The TCPS also recognizes that requiring participants to sign a written consent form is not always culturally appropriate. In all of these situations participants can provide oral consent to participate once the research and research activities are fully described to them.

When Interviewing Participants over the Phone or via Skype

1. Provide the participant with a written copy of the consent form in advance of the interview (via email, fax, or regular mail). The interview session can be scheduled when the participant indicates that he or she is satisfied with the information described in the consent form.

2. At the beginning of the interview session, let the participant know that you will be audio/video recording the consent process. Confirm that the participant has the consent form in front of them. Write the time and date on your version of the consent form to document the consent date. Write the name of the participant on your version of the consent form.

3. Ask the participant to state his or her name for the recording. Ask the participant to confirm that he/she has read and understood the consent form.

4. Ask the participant if he/she has any questions about the information in the consent form. These questions should be addressed before the interview begins.

5. Ask the participant if he/she is willing to participate under the conditions described in the consent form (and note responses to the check box choices on the form, if applicable). Once the participant’s oral consent is recorded, announce that you are ending the recording of the consent process.

6. If practical and feasible, after the interview is completed have the participant email, fax, or mail their copy of the signed consent form to you for your records.

7. Audio/video recordings documenting the consent process should be stored securely on password protected devices (computers, USB keys, etc.). If you will not be collecting signed
consent forms you should keep these recordings and store them for as long as signed consent forms would be stored.

When Interviewing Participants Who Will Not Be Signing a Written Consent Form

1. Whenever possible, provide the participant with a written copy of the consent form in advance of the interview (via email, fax, or regular mail), unless doing so will jeopardize the individual’s anonymity and/or the confidentiality of their participation.

2. Read over the consent form with the participant and answer any questions they may have. When you are confident the participant understands the information and can provide fully informed consent, you can document their consent by recording the date and time on the consent form. You may also wish to use a code for identification purposes. Put your own signature on the form and store it in a secure location.

The TCPS indicates that when there are valid reasons for not recording consent through a signed written consent form, the procedures used to seek and confirm consent must be documented (Article 10.2). To meet this requirement, be sure to describe your oral consent procedures very clearly in your ethics application.

Finally, the TCPS (Article 3.12) recommends that researchers provide participants with written information about the study and the researchers (e.g., affiliations and contact details), when appropriate:

“Whether or not a consent form is signed, it may be advisable to leave a written statement of the information conveyed in the consent process with the participant. For participants, it is evidence that they have agreed to participate in a particular research project. It may serve as a reminder to participants of the terms of the research project. It may also facilitate the ability of participants to consider and reconsider their involvement as the research proceeds. However, researchers should not leave any documentation with participants if it may compromise their safety or confidentiality. Additionally, in some cases it may not be appropriate to leave a written statement, such as in cultural settings where such written documentation is contrary to prevailing norms.”

The CFREB consent form template will facilitate the consent process and should always be used unless there are compelling reasons not to. The template is available on the CFREB webpage: http://wcm.ucalgary.ca/researchdev/researchers/ethics-compliance/cfreb. The section headings in the template (e.g., “What Happens to the Information I Provide?”) address questions that must be explained to participants and the template organizes this information in a way that significantly facilitates the review process.

For further information on any of the points above, please contact the Chair of the CFREB or a Research Ethics Analyst at cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

Chair, Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB)