Getting Meaningful Informed Consent from Older Adults: A Structured Literature Review of Empirical Research


To help form recommendations to improve the informed consent process with older adults, our team performed a comprehensive literature review of the published empirical research. Studies were included if they were reports of primary research data about informed consent, whether in the context of research or treatment, and if older subjects were included in the sample. To structure the results, we evaluated different components of the informed consent process—recruitment, decision-making capacity, voluntariness, disclosure of information, understanding of information, consent forms, authorization, and policies and procedures.

A secondary analysis of the structured results found that diminished understanding of informed consent information was associated with older age and fewer years of education, and that older age was somewhat associated with decreased participation in research. Strategies to improve older adults’ understanding of informed consent include novel formats (e.g., simplified forms, use of video) and procedures (e.g., use of health educators, quizzesing subjects, multiple disclosure sessions).

A number of subsequent studies have used the structured literature review to guide the evaluation of the quality and efficacy of informed consent. Researchers have also applied the review to informed consent in a number of settings, including those involving end-of-life care, emergency services, cancer patients, dementia and schizophrenia patients, low-literacy populations, rural populations, and palliative care.