

**Ottawa Health Science Network Research Ethics Board (OHSN-REB) /  
 Conseil d'éthique de la recherche du réseau de science de la santé d'Ottawa (CÉR-RSSO)**

**Please share the following with your study teams:  
 REB Quick Tips for Getting Started with a Quality Improvement vs Research Submission**

**What is Quality Improvement (QI)? How is QI different from Research?**

**1** Distinguishing between Quality Improvement (QI) and Research can often be confusing, here are some **key differences** between QI and Research to keep in mind prior to submitting a QI Survey.

<u>Key Differences</u>	Clinical Research	Quality Improvement
<b>Purpose</b>	A systematic investigation to establish facts, principles or contribute to generalizable knowledge	To <b>implement knowledge, evaluate or improve a process or program</b> through established/accepted standards
<b>Mandate</b>	Activities not mandated by institution	<b>Activities are mandated by institution</b> as part of operations
<b>Starting Point</b>	Knowledge-seeking is independent of routine care and intended to answer a question or test a hypothesis with the intention of contributing to generalizable knowledge	<b>Knowledge-seeking is integral to ongoing management system for delivering health care</b>
<b>Risks</b>	May put participants at risk with consent	<b>No increased risk to participants</b> , with exception of possible participants' privacy or confidentiality of data
<b>Testing or Analysis</b>	Statistically prove or disprove hypothesis	<b>Compare program, process or system to established standards</b>
<b>End Point</b>	Answer a research question and/or invite critical appraisal of that conclusion by peers through presentation.	<b>Improve a program, process or system</b>

*Note: In some cases, initiatives that are predominantly QI may have certain elements that make them fall under research.*

**2 Do I need to submit my QI Project to OHSN-REB for Review via the electronic QI Survey?**

Yes. If you are conducting a quality improvement (QI) project at The Ottawa Hospital (TOH) or the University of Ottawa Heart Institute (UOHI), you must submit your project through the electronic [QI Survey](#) **before** starting the QI initiative.

**3 What documents do I need to submit to have my QI Project reviewed?**

All QI Survey submissions require a protocol or study plan. This is mandatory and the QI Survey cannot be submitted without a protocol or study plan.

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### Where can I find the QI Survey?

You can access the QI Survey at either of the following locations:

- [IRISGuide](#): In the *REB Education Catalogue* of the *Human Research Ethics* page
- [OHSN-REB Website](#): Under the tab titled *Quality Improvement*.

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### QI Survey REB Review Process

- Upon submission of your QI Survey, the REB Chair and/or Vice-Chair will be notified automatically.
- After their review, you will receive an automated email indicating whether your project has been classified as research requiring a REB application, or as a Quality Improvement initiative, exempt from REB review.

**Important:**

If your responses indicate your project qualifies as QI, you may choose to complete and save the survey without submitting it for REB review. However, selecting this option means you **will not** receive an REB exemption letter.

**Please note:**

The REB can only review projects and issue exemption letters **before** the project begins. No review or exemption letter can be provided after the project has started.

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### What is the Target Turnaround Times?

The REB Chair or Vice-Chair will review the QI submission within **3 business days** of receipt.

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### How do I Register my QI Project?

All QI projects must be registered with the Quality Improvement Office at the respective institution:

- **For TOH projects:** Complete the [TOH QI Registration Form](#).
  - For questions, contact the TOH Quality Improvement office at [quality@toh.ca](mailto:quality@toh.ca)
- **For UOHI projects:** Register the project with the UOHI Quality Office at [quality@ottawaheart.ca](mailto:quality@ottawaheart.ca)

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### Process when the QI Project is Exempt from REB Review

- If your project is classified as QI, you will receive an email from REB Administration confirming the exemption and including an exemption letter.
- Keep this exemption letter for your records.
- You must also register your project with the appropriate Quality Improvement office as described above.

**Please note:**

QI projects can evolve and potentially become research over time. If your project changes, it is highly recommended to re-submit the QI Survey for reassessment. If you re-submit, you will need to provide the original QI Survey project ID to assist the Chair or Vice-Chair in reviewing your updated submission.

## Process when the Project Requires an REB Ethics Application

- If your project is determined to be research, you must submit a delegated prospective REB ethics application via the IRIS System for review.

### Resources:

- Visit **IRISGuide** to access the [REB Education Catalogue](#), which includes:
  - How to submit and navigate an REB Ethics Application in IRIS
  - How to submit a delegated prospective REB application
- Additional information is available on the [OHSN-REB website](#).

### Accessing the IRIS System:

- Log in with your TOH credentials.
- If you have trouble accessing IRIS, contact IRIS Support at [irissupport@ohri.zendesk.com](mailto:irissupport@ohri.zendesk.com)
- If you don't have TOH login credentials, email [REBAdministration@ohri.ca](mailto:REBAdministration@ohri.ca)
- For IT issues unrelated to IRIS Support, submit a Service Now Request at [servicenow@toh.ca](mailto:servicenow@toh.ca)

## FAQs for QI versus Research

### Why is deciding if a project is research or quality improvement is important?

Research involving human participants must undergo REB review and approval; quality improvement projects do not.

### What is the difference between research and quality improvement?

**Research** is defined as: “an undertaking intended to extend knowledge through a disciplined inquiry and or systematic investigation. Research aims to produce generalizable knowledge by answering a specific research question or testing a hypothesis via scientific methods.

**Quality improvement** projects aim to introduce changes that will lead to improved patient outcomes (health), system performance (care) and/or professional development. Often, quality improvement projects seek to implement already established best practices. Quality improvement projects generally do not place any additional burdens on participants other than what is expected during standard care or practice.

Research and quality improvement exist on a continuum. Some projects may contain features of both research and quality improvement that can make it difficult to clearly distinguish research from quality improvement initiatives.

### Do I automatically need REB review if I intend to publish?

No, intent to publish does not determine whether a project requires REB review. However, if you plan to publish your QI project in research journals, you may be required to provide proof of REB review exemption to the journal editor. If planning to publish in research journals, best practice would be to submit the QI project for REB review to obtain the REB exemption letter as the REB can only provide an exemption letter prior to starting the QI project.

Intrinsic components of QI are shared learning; therefore, it is entirely appropriate to disseminate and replicate QI successes, including through channels that are external to an organization. This may include presentations at meetings and publications in professional journals (e.g., QI journals). Therefore, the mere intent to publish the findings of a QI project in QI journals **does not obligate REB review**. Please note, the publication should not refer to the activity as research and must be made clear that the publication is the result of a quality improvement initiative.

### **Who should complete the QI Survey?**

This tool should be completed if:

- You are uncertain as to whether your project needs to be submitted for REB review or
- You are certain it is QI and may plan to publish. Consider submitting for review to obtain an exemption from REB review letter to provide at time of publication as this may be requested by the journal.

***Note: The REB does not retroactively review projects that have already been completed, so an exemption needs to be sought at the outset of a project.***

### **Who is responsible for the decision?**

The final authority as to whether a project requires REB approval lies with the REB Chair/Vice-Chairs. A copy of the REB letter with the final determination of whether the project is QI or research will be provided to you and a copy will be sent to the Quality Office for their records.

#### **This Applies To:**

Physicians, staff (including staff acting as investigators outside the institution), fellows, residents, volunteers, and students.

### **Do I automatically need REB review if I intend to publish?**

No, intent to publish does not determine whether a project requires REB review.

**If you would like to request a virtual meeting with the Chair or REB Manager to learn more about QI versus Research reviews, please contact [REBAdministration@ohri.ca](mailto:REBAdministration@ohri.ca)**