Unethical Research Cases and the Lessons That Shaped Modern Research Ethics Making the Case for Institutional Review Boards:
A Historical Overview

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) did not emerge from abstract ethical theory or administrative preference. They developed in direct response to repeated and well-documented failures to protect human research participants (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986; Katz, 1972). Throughout the twentieth century, researchers across multiple national contexts conducted studies that exposed individuals to harm, deception, and exploitation—often selecting participants precisely because they were marginalized, institutionalized, or lacked the power to refuse (Brandt, 1978). This chapter examines three landmark cases from Germany, the United States, and Sweden. Although differing in political and cultural context, each case demonstrates similar ethical breakdowns: absence of informed consent, exploitation of vulnerable populations, disproportionate risk without benefit, and lack of independent accountability (Belmont Report, 1979).

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Professional norms and individual goodwill proved insufficient to safeguard participants. In the absence of enforceable standards, ethical decision-making was shaped by institutional pressure, nationalism, public health urgency, and scientific prestige (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). IRBs emerged as a corrective to these systemic failures, translating ethical ideals into formalized, enforceable mechanisms of review (National Research Act, 1974). Understanding this history is essential not only for explaining why IRBs exist, but for recognizing the human cost of research conducted without them.

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Germany: Nazi Human Experiments (1930s–1940s)

During World War II, Nazi physicians and scientists conducted brutal experiments on prisoners in concentration camps, including Jews, Roma, people with disabilities, and political detainees (Nuremberg Code, 1947). These studies involved hypothermia and freezing experiments, high-altitude simulations, exposure to infectious diseases, forced sterilization, and invasive procedures performed without