The ethical conduct of biomedical research on human subjects requires informed consent, which, in turn, is composed of three elements: a) information, the subject understanding the purpose of the research and its risks and benefits both for the subject and for society; b) competence, the subject’s ability to process the information and make a stable, reasoned decision in light of long-term values and interests; and c) voluntariness, the absence of inappropriate coercion or enticement, either objective or as experienced by the subject.

We expect these requirements to be monitored by an independent review board, one that will consider the scientific and social value of the research, the cultural context in which it will be conducted, the fairness of the strategy for selecting potential participants in view of the anticipated recipients of the benefits, and, in general, the subjects’ rights and interests.

We have here a discussion from an ethical perspective of an interesting research project. It passes the simplest test of ethical propriety; at first glance, the scientists seem to have taken these matters into consideration and nothing is glaringly offensive. However, that is only at first glance.

The subjects were female university students (appropriate because the disorder being studied is prevalent in women, especially those “with access to university education’’). They were recruited through posters and (here we get concerned) “by lecturing staff who assisted the researchers.” The ethical problem of dual roles emerge. We are extremely concerned if a treating physician recruits a patient—will the patient feel free to say “no”? The problem of a lecturer and a student is not identical, but it is not entirely different.

We are given an additional piece of information that is quite concerning. Every participant who was provided with an information sheet and a consent form agreed to participate. We worry about true voluntariness when there is an extra-research relationship between the investigator and the subject and where there is 100% consent: some level of refusal makes voluntariness more plausible.

There is a scientific argument for using students (but not students of the investigator). We would be more comfortable about voluntariness if the students came from other university programs or other teachers or at least were not approached by their own lecturers. The problem is compounded when we learn that the participants were offered “academic inducements”—exemption from otherwise required academic assignments. Once again, this represents a serious blurring of the line between student and research subject. We are not told whether the students could be exempted if they participated in some other unrelated research, or perhaps even better, if they wrote a brief essay on why this protocol violated ethics principles and they refused to participate.

The investigators ran into trouble. They were not prepared for the clinical problems provoked by their methods, problems no doubt more distressing because of their dual relationship with their subjects.

The moral of this story about ethics is simple. Unless there is a compelling reason, research is best done on subjects who do not have a potentially conflicting relationship with the researcher. Convenience is not an acceptable argument against this. Furthermore, if the research subjects are students, it is particularly important to employ methods that pass ethical scrutiny; otherwise, we are teaching our students how to do unethical research and, in this case, offering 5% course credit to boot. Finally, it is the responsibility of the institutional review board to assure that protocols involving this kind of potential exploitation, even if of scientific interest, are not approved.