To the Editor of the Indian Journal of Medical Ethics

Review of the following article:

“Comparison of ethical issues in Indian and New Zealand prospective studies of cervical pre-cancer” byCharlotte Paul MB, PhD

“The aim of this ‘opinion’ piece was to compare the ethics of historical Indian and New Zealand prospective studies of cervical pre-cancer in terms of: scientific justification, potential harms and benefits to subjects, informed consent procedures, monitoring and stopping, and exploitation”. The author concludes that a public judicial inquiry, as was done in New Zealand, would help to resolve the lingering doubts about the ethics of the Indian studies.

The author does not rely on when particular ethical codes but focuses on the ethical questions. This was a good decision and strengthens the arguments she puts forward. The similarities and differences between the New Zealand and India studies are clearly discussed. The India studies could have been criticized more rather than being described as minor. Researchers were dealing with a largely illiterate and marginalized population. When dysplasia was identified, patients were referred to local hospitals where there were long waiting periods. Given the clear social disenfranchisement of the population and their likely fear of hospitals, the investigators had an ethical obligation to be more proactive in seeking care for the participants. This was compounded by a lack of documented informed consent. Did participants truly understand what was being asked when such words as “regress to normal” were used to describe a cervical lesion. There’s no evidence for this. Lastly the research team provided no treatment to the women once the study had ended.

The suggestion that inquiry should have been a more open process and that the records of the in-house inquiry be made available is a step in the right direction. The discussion section could be expanded to further address this issue. It might be interesting to seek commentary from an Indian observer on why such an open process was not carried out and the likelihood that such a process could be put into affect in future situations .