Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) continue to endure a painful crisis period. Many IRBs lack sufficient resources and expertise and strain under the weight of ever-increasing workloads and a more complex research environment. Yet insufficient attention has been paid to how IRBs perform relative to other oversight bodies. One unappreciated reference point for better understanding IRBs is the corporate board of directors. The experience of corporate boards offers a fresh perspective for assessing IRBs’ institutional strengths and limitations and for thinking about the proper direction of IRB reform.

As with the current period of IRB crisis, these are turbulent times for corporate governance. The alleged oversight failures of corporate directors feature prominently in the current round of business scandals at public corporations such as Enron and WorldCom. Renewed attention has focused on board dynamics and improving the monitoring effectiveness of corporate boards. What could IRBs learn from these parallel corporate board developments? IRBs and corporate boards have drawbacks as monitoring bodies for very similar reasons. A number of disparate factors influence board performance, and qualitatively improving board operations is no easy task. Accordingly, those calling for reform of the IRB system would benefit by paying greater attention to the corporate board experience. For example, corporate board developments suggest that one popular IRB reform proposal—increasing the number of IRB community members—should be viewed with some degree of caution. Unless accompanied by more comprehensive changes, adding more community members to an IRB will likely have limited impact on the IRB’s performance. In addition, the corporate board perspective warns against pushing IRBs to take on a more direct role in reviewing researcher and institutional financial conflicts of interest.

Shared Monitoring Limitations

As complex oversight institutions, IRBs assume many duties, including ethics consultation, education, and peer review. Yet the basic function required of all IRBs is to monitor clinical trials to protect the safety and welfare of research subjects. IRBs’ monitoring activities include initial review of protocols, requiring modifications to initial research plans, continuing review at designated intervals of research projects already underway, and consideration of subject or investigator complaints and adverse event reports as they may arise. IRBs also can exercise monitoring authority by establishing record-keeping requirements and internal policies for investigators to follow. Additionally, IRBs can