Ethical Issues in Clinical Research

Overview

- Research Design
  - Randomization
  - Placebos
  - Confidentiality
  - Selection of Subjects
- Informed Consent

A Case

Oncologists at a referral hospital in Taiwan want to evaluate a promising therapy for its efficacy in treating head & neck cancer. Although their scientific training suggests the need for a randomized, controlled trial, they are reluctant to do so because they believe it would be impossible to obtain informed consent because if they share this design with the patients, the patients will seek care elsewhere, probably from traditional healers.
Working with Randomization

- The problem
- Why use randomization?
- Conflicts associated with randomization
  - Research design
  - The tight relationship of clinical care and research

The Problem

- Uncontrolled observations may not be valid
  - The humbling history of medicine
  - The existence of marked clinical variation
- Controlled observations may threaten validity

Why Use Randomization?

- Minimize observer bias
- Minimize patient selection bias
Conflicts Related to Research Design

- Theoretical/Individual equipoise
- Clinical equipoise

Theoretical Equipoise

- “Theoretical equipoise exists when, overall, the evidence on behalf of two alternative treatment regimens is exactly balanced.”
- Evidence derives from literature, experience, theory, and instinct
- Held by an individual

Problems with Theoretical Equipoise

- Not suited for a complicated world
- Sensitive to the investigator’s perception
- Personal and idiosyncratic
Clinical Equipoise

• “There is no consensus within the expert clinical community about the alternatives to be tested.”
• Consistent with decided treatment preferences of an investigator
• Medicine is social rather than individual
• Clinical equipoise does not require concealing information from subjects

Tensions Associated with Randomization

• Conflicts related to research design
• Conflicts related to the tight relationship of care and research
  – Conflicting obligations
  – Practical challenges

Conflicting Obligations

• Clinician
  – Patient welfare
  – Loyalty and fidelity
• Investigator
  – Acquisition of knowledge
  – Objectivity
Practical Challenges

• Informed consent
• Preserve individual treatment
• Permit treatment preferences

Informed Consent

• Reluctance to approach patients with uncertainty
• Reluctance to have treatment selected by chance
• The therapeutic misconception
• Cultural barriers

Practical Challenges

• Informed consent
• Preserve individual treatment
• Permit treatment preferences
Vertical Transmission Studies and Placebo Controls

- US study 076
  - The regimen
    - Oral AZT during pregnancy
    - IV AZT during labor and delivery
    - No breast feeding
  - The results
    - Decreased vertical transmission to 8%
- Contemporaneous trials in Africa and Asia
  - Lurie and Wolf
  - Angell: Tuskegee analogy

Declaration of Helsinki (October 2000)

- “The benefits, risks, burdens and effectiveness of a new method should be tested against those of the best current prophylactic, diagnostic, and therapeutic methods.”

Research Design and Placebos

- Why?
  - Smaller sample size
  - Improved assessments of efficacy and safety
- When?
  - No known effective treatment
  - Others
FOOTNOTE:  
NOTE OF CLARIFICATION ON PARAGRAPH 29 of the WMA DECLARATION OF HELSINKI

- The WMA hereby reaffirms its position that extreme care must be taken in making use of a placebo-controlled trial and that in general this methodology should only be used in the absence of existing proven therapy. However, a placebo-controlled trial may be ethically acceptable, even if proven therapy is available, under the following circumstances:
  - Where for compelling and scientifically sound methodological reasons its use is necessary to determine the efficacy or safety of a prophylactic, diagnostic or therapeutic method; or
  - Where a prophylactic, diagnostic or therapeutic method is being investigated for a minor condition and the patients who receive placebo will not be subject to any additional risk of serious or irreversible harm.
- All other provisions of the Declaration of Helsinki must be adhered to, especially the need for appropriate ethical and scientific review.

http://www.wma.net/e/policy/17_c_e.html

Declaration of Helsinki (2008)

The benefits, risks, burdens and effectiveness of a new intervention must be tested against those of the best current proven intervention, except in the following circumstances:
- The use of placebo, or no treatment, is acceptable in studies where no current proven intervention exists; or
- Where for compelling and scientifically sound methodological reasons the use of placebo is necessary to determine the efficacy or safety of an intervention and the patients who receive placebo or no treatment will not be subject to any risk of serious or irreversible harm. Extreme care must be taken to avoid abuse of this option.


Confidentiality

- Why?
  - Desire for balanced recruitment
  - Desire for “good” information
  - Protect participants from social risks: insurance, jobs, housing, and the law
- When?
  - Any research posing potential social and some economic risks
- Challenges?
  - Must be considered in the design of research
  - Strategies may be expensive
Shifting Claims/Justice & Subject Selection

- AIDS activism
- Cancer activism

Justice as Access

- The ‘vulnerable sick’
- Children
- Women
- Minorities
Subject Selection

• Why?
  – Generalizability
  – Justice

• When?
  – Disease or condition is of relevance to the population or population subgroup

• Challenges?
  – Statistical power
  – Recruitment and retention

Two Senses of Informed Consent

• Autonomous authorization

• Social rules of consent

Autonomous Authorization

• Ethical principle of respect for persons

• Right to liberty
Two Senses of Informed Consent

• Autonomous authorization
• Social rules of consent

Social Rules

• Consent of minors
• Special forms
• Witnesses

Informed Consent Process

Threshold

Decision-making capacity
Informed Consent Process

Threshold
- Decision-making capacity
- Voluntariness

Information
- Disclosure

Threshold
- Decision-making capacity
- Voluntariness
Informed Consent Process

**Threshold**
- Decision-making capacity
- Voluntariness

**Authorization**
- Indication of agreement
- Consent forms:
  - Consistent with disclosure
  - Readable

**Information**
- Disclosure
- Understanding

Concluding Comments

- The design and conduct of research is associated with important ethical issues
- Attending to these issues can help meet investigators’ ethical obligations towards those who are willing to participate in research