

## Mental Health Clinical Research – Part 2

Editor's Note: This is the second article in a multi-part series. Part 1 appeared in the June 2001 issue of Attention!®. The information is reprinted with permission from the NIMH publication, "A Participant's Guide to Mental Health and Clinical Research."<sup>1</sup>



### What Is a "Placebo Control" in a Medication Trial?

Studies of new drugs often compare the effects of an investigational drug with the effects of a placebo. If you are considering whether to take part in a drug trial, the director of the study must tell you if the study will use a placebo control. The informed consent form that you will sign if you agree to join the study must also explain any plans to use a placebo control.

The reason for using a placebo control is that the benefits from taking medications are not always due to the drug itself. These benefits are called "placebo effects." An example is when an investigator's enthusiasm about a new medication sometimes influences the patient's response.

A researcher must be able to separate placebo effects from the actual effects of the drug being studied. When equal numbers of patients receive either a placebo or another standard drug that will help treat their symptoms, the researcher can better judge the actual effects of the drug being tested.

In a "double-blind, placebo-controlled" research design, the doctors and nurses working directly with patients in the study will not know which group patients are in. Only members of the research team not involved in providing day-to-day clinical care will know which patients are receiving an active treatment or a placebo. This information is shared only when there is a medical necessity to do so to protect the patient and at the end of the study.

Some scientists have questioned the use of placebo controls in clinical research. They argue that if any drug is effective in treating a given condition, then only that drug, and not a placebo, should be given as the control. Other researchers, however, believe that without a placebo control, it is harder to know whether an investigational medication is better than existing drugs. The choice depends on what is being studied, the medicine, and the illness.

If, during a study, an investigational drug seems to work very well, the researcher may stop using the placebo. In some instances, as discussed in a later section, participants may have a chance to use the investigational drug after a study is completed.

It is important that the director of a medication trial explain thoroughly any planned use of a placebo. Ask how the researcher plans to keep track of your symptoms. Also, ask if there is a possibility that your symptoms could become severe during the research project. If your symptoms worsen, at what point will the researcher decide to remove you from the study and provide standard treatment? In talking about these possibilities with the researcher,

you must remember that participating in a study does not guarantee that you will receive a promising new medication. Indeed, you must consent to that fact. Also, you should remember that even if you receive an investigational drug, it may not be helpful for you. Remember: you can always withdraw from a study.

### **What Is the Investigator's Responsibility if a Patient Has a Clinical Crisis?**

You read earlier about the differences between clinical research and the care you receive from your personal doctor. In most research, an investigator will try to follow the research design: Following a research plan that has met all of the conditions described in the next section of this pamphlet – conditions meant to ensure that any proposed clinical research has scientific merit and is fully attentive to participants' well-being – takes precedence over "tailoring" treatments to a patient's unique needs. However, a patient who becomes much worse during a study will be withdrawn from the project and given immediate personal care, even though the worsening may not be related to the treatment being given.

You and, if it is appropriate, your legally authorized representative should discuss with the investigator the possibility that your illness could worsen during the research study. Then you can decide how to handle any emergencies that might arise during the study.

Among the issues you may wish to discuss are how the researcher will judge the nature and severity of your symptoms. Another issue could be that, under certain conditions such as a medication washout or a pharmacologic challenge, you might decide to reject all treatment. If you are seriously ill, you might not recognize how dangerous that decision could be. Thus, you should agree in advance on how to handle this situation.

### **What Protections Exist for Research Subjects?**

Many "checkpoints" ensure that research meets strict scientific guidelines and follows rules that protect the subject. Several groups who are not part of the research team examine both the scientific plan and procedures to protect the interests of participants before an investigator may begin the research.

Each proposed study, including its provisions for the protection of human subjects and its consent form, must be approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Every organization that conducts research, for example a university or hospital, must have an IRB. The membership of these boards includes scientists, persons who are not scientific experts, and at least one "public" member who is not associated with the organization.

An important IRB responsibility is to review the informed consent materials that an investigator develops for those who take part in the study. This information allows the IRB and – more critically – you to judge the value, risks, and potential benefits of a research project. If an IRB has concerns about any part of the research proposal, the committee will tell the director of the study. The researcher must attend to these concerns before submitting the research proposal to a funding agency.

A funding agency, such as the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), provides the next review of human subject provisions for clinical research proposals. The funding agency also judges the scientific importance of a research proposal, and how the researcher will learn from it. Both the IRB and the funding agency conduct regular reviews to be sure that the researchers are meeting all the rules for the protection of human subjects.

You can be certain that a range of persons, both scientists and others, have reviewed any IRB-approved research that you may be asked to join. Nonetheless, having a general understanding yourself of how scientists conduct clinical research will help you feel more confident when talking about the project with the research director. A

<sup>1</sup>National Institute of Mental Health. (2000). A participant's guide to mental health clinical research (NIH publication #00-4379). Bethesda, MD.