



National Health Ethics Week 2017: April 3-9th

Research Ethics Bulletin #3: Incentives and Reimbursement of Research Participants

Incentives for research participants can present many ethical dilemmas. Incentives are anything offered to participants, monetary or otherwise, for participation in research (incentives differ from reimbursements and compensation). The Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2 2014) acknowledges the use of incentives as a legitimate way of encouraging participation in research, but neither discourages nor encourages the use of incentives (see application of Article 3.1).

Principlesⁱ:

Embedded in the principle of justice, participation in research should be accessible to everyone, regardless of socio-economic status. Researchers should recognize that participation in research may involve direct costs including child care, transportation to and from the research site, parking, etc. Reimbursement ensures that such costs are not borne by participants, and therefore removes financial implications from participants' consideration to enroll. Reimbursement for participation-related expenses may be reimbursed directly (e.g. covering travel costs to and from a research site) or indirectly (e.g. providing a gift card). Compensation involves several ethics principles: justice and respect – recognizing that the time and effort of participation is valuable and worthy of recognition; and autonomy and voluntariness – ensuring that participants are not unduly influenced into consenting to participate. Other principles may come into play (e.g. beneficence and privacy), depending on the participant population, research methods and other factors.

Can incentives be offered as a recruitment strategy and paid regardless of whether individuals choose to become involved in the study?

Ordinarily, incentives are given to participants who have consented to participate in a study, even if they withdraw before completing the study. It is, however, possible to provide incentives in advance of the decision to participate for recruitment purposes if the REB approves this incentive plan. For example, gift cards may be offered to a group with an invitation to participate in an online survey. In this scenario, the researcher is hoping that some portion of individuals who received the gift card will participate in the study but the payment is not dependent on participation. Individuals receive the payment regardless of whether they choose to participate in the study.

Are all models of incentives for recruitment and participation in research ethically acceptable?

Incentives are an important consideration in assessing voluntariness to consent to participate in research. They should not be so large or attractive as to encourage reckless disregard of risks, or result in undue inducement. Incentives for participation in research may be monetary or may take other forms, for example lotteries, or bonus credits to students. TCPS2 does not provide guidance on the ethical acceptability of specific incentive models. The onus is on the researcher to justify to the REB the use of a particular incentive model and the level of incentives in the research. It is the REB that makes the final determination on the appropriateness of the use of the proposed incentive from an ethics perspective, taking into consideration the context of the research, the economic circumstances of the pool of prospective participants, their age and capacity, and the customs and practices of the community. In general, recruitment techniques (e.g. advertising) should not focus on compensation as a means of enticing potential participants. While it is appropriate (and required) to discuss compensation with participants through the informed consent process, it is inappropriate to use compensation as the main reason for individuals to consider participation in research.

Use of Draws

Draws may be ethically acceptable provided that the prize, irrespective of the odds of winning, is not significant enough to unduly influence participation in the study. Information on the prize and its value, the probability of winning and the number of participants in the study, should all be provided through the informed consent process. If personal information (e.g. name, phone number) must be collected for the draw, the researcher should maintain security of this information throughout the duration of the study, and should destroy the information once prizes have been awarded.

ⁱ University of Toronto Guidelines for Compensation and Reimbursement of Research Participants, Feb 16, 2011