

SWAT 60: Mentioning scarcity of trial places in text (SMS) reminders

Objective of this SWAT

To evaluate the effect of mentioning scarcity of trial places in text (SMS) reminders on recruitment of trial participants

Study area: Recruitment

Sample type: Participants

Estimated funding level needed: Low

Background

Many people do not respond to initial invitations to take part in a trial. Reminders have been shown to be effective in increasing response rates to postal questionnaires [1], but this evidence does not generally come from studies done in clinical trials. One way to deliver a reminder is by sending text messages to the person's mobile telephone. The Cochrane Methodology Review on recruitment interventions [2] includes data from a study [3] that used text (SMS) reminders to support recruitment, which mentioned scarcity of trial places in the message. The study had promising results (risk difference = 3% (95% CI = 1% to 6%)) but uncertainty remains as to whether the intervention can be effective more widely and this will be addressed by this SWAT.

Interventions and comparators

Intervention 1: an SMS message to individuals who have been sent an invitation to take part in a trial but who have not responded to that invitation. How long the trial team waits until sending the SMS is at the discretion of the trial team, as is the number of attempts made to call a non-responder if there is no answer to the first SMS. The content of SMS message includes text about scarcity of trial places: '...only [x] places left' which should be the true number of remaining places to avoid the use of deception.

Intervention 2: SMS reminder but with no mention of scarcity of trial places.

Index Type: Method of Recruitment

Method for allocating to intervention or comparator

Randomisation

Outcome measures

Primary: Numbers recruited.

Secondary: None

Analysis plans

The primary analysis is the difference in recruitment rate between those receiving an SMS message that mentions scarcity and those who receive a reminder with no mention of scarcity.

Possible problems in implementing this SWAT

Firstly, ethical committees and trial teams may be concerned about the intervention having an adverse effect on recruitment. There is very little high-quality evidence supporting any recruitment strategy but the evidence in favour of mentioning scarcity in SMS reminders is better than many things that are used to try and improve recruitment [2]. However, this evidence comes from a single trial, meaning it is uncertain as to whether the benefits apply more widely. Without more evaluations, such as this SWAT, trial teams will have little evidence on which to base their decisions about using SMS reminders in their recruitment strategies. Secondly, trial teams may want some reassurance that the intervention is not having an adverse effect before the SWAT study reaches its planned end. They could be reassured by an interim analysis but this should be pre-planned with pre-defined stopping rules.

References

1. Edwards PJ, Roberts I, Clarke MJ, DiGuseppi C, Wentz R, Kwan I, Cooper R, Felix LM, Pratap S. Methods to increase response to postal and electronic questionnaires. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2009; (3): MR000008.

2. Treweek S, Pitkethly M, Cook J, Fraser C, Mitchell E, Sullivan F, Jackson C, Taskila TK, Gardner H. Strategies to improve recruitment to randomised controlled trials. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (update submitted).
3. Free CJ, Hoile E, Knight R, Robertson S, Devries KM. Do messages of scarcity increase trial recruitment? Contemporary Clinical Trials 2011; 32: 36-9.

Publications or presentations of this SWAT design

Treweek S, Pitkethly M, Cook J, Fraser C, Mitchell E, Sullivan F, Jackson C, Taskila TK, Gardner H. Strategies to improve recruitment to randomised controlled trials. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (update submitted).

Examples of the implementation of this SWAT

People to show as the source of this idea: Shaun Treweek, Marie Pitkethly, Jonathan Cook, Cynthia Fraser, Elizabeth Mitchell, Frank Sullivan, Catherine Jackson, Taina Taskila, Heidi Gardner.

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