Global Efforts to Protect Healthy Volunteers

by Jill A. Fisher

Bioethics has long had a fascination with healthy individuals who enroll in biomedical research for financial compensation. My own empirical research for more than a decade has focused on how healthy volunteers decide to enroll in U.S. clinical trials, including their views of the risks and benefits. My research findings have shown how clinical trials on healthy volunteers generate unique ethical challenges both because participants accept potential physical risks without the possibility of direct medical benefit and because participants' financial motivations to enroll could lead to their exploitation. Given these clear-cut empirical realities of healthy-volunteer research, it is imperative to improve how such research is overseen and regulated.

One effort along these lines is the Volunteers in Research and Ethics (VolREthics) Initiative (https://www.inserm.fr/en/ethics/volrethics/). Launched in 2022 by scholars at Inserm, the French national biomedical research agency, this initiative brings together an international community to engage questions about how healthy volunteers could best be protected from the risks of harm and exploitation while the validity of clinical trials is optimized. To date, the VolREthics Initiative has hosted a virtual meeting in February 2022; a series of regional workshops in 2022 and early 2023 to explore the local contexts of healthy-volunteer research in Africa, Asia, North America, Latin America, and Europe; and an in-person plenary meeting in Brussels at the European Commission in April 2023. With support from organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Wellcome Trust, and the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences, the VolREthics Initiative has involved researchers from multiple fields, pharmaceutical companies and contract research organizations, regulatory agencies, and healthy volunteers from five continents.

The VolREthics Initiative aims to produce guidelines by learning how countries are protecting—or failing to protect—healthy volunteers in biomedical research. For example, in seeking best practices from around the world, the April 2023 meeting highlighted how several countries are using participant registries to manage healthy volunteers' involvement in clinical trials and to prevent dual enrollment. Despite limitations to the registries and concerns about participants' privacy and autonomy, meeting attendees largely agreed that establishing more robust registries to track the trial participation of healthy volunteers is critical to protect them from harm and bolster the validity of clinical trial results.

The two-day meeting at the European Commission also shed significant light on the U.S. context of healthy-volunteer research. For meeting attendees from most of the world, the highly commercial nature of U.S. clinical trials—including their use of "professional" healthy volunteers and for-profit institutional review boards—was largely seen as an example of how *not* to conduct research and protect participants. While the majority of meeting attendees rehearsed arguments about the dangers of undue inducement and coercion, those of us from North America, including scholars and regulators, focused instead on how the motivation for healthy volunteers to enroll in clinical trials is already financial and the goal of ethical and regulatory guidance should be to ensure that healthy volunteers are compensated fairly for their research contributions. In other words, we saw exploitation as the bigger risk to healthy volunteers. This difference in our views on financial compensation illustrates the value of the VolREthics Initiative in bringing together stakeholders from around the world.

As the organizers of the April meeting made clear at its closing, considerable work remains to develop international guidelines for the protection of healthy volunteers in research. The next steps for the VolREthics Initiative include forming thematic working groups to focus on the following issues: protecting healthy volunteers from exploitation, protecting them from harm, and ensuring the validity of healthy-volunteer clinical trials. Such international collaboration is far from easy, but the recognition that this work is important and necessary is a critical step in addressing ethical concerns about healthy-volunteer research.

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