

Indecent proposal? Ethics of paying participants of biomedical research

Abstract for the general public

Progress in biomedical sciences and healthcare is crucially dependent on the individuals' willingness to serve as research participants. Insufficient or slow recruitment and poor retention rates are, however, common problems within biomedical research. Although many different factors contribute to this situation, evidence shows that concerns regarding financial costs and benefits associated with participation play a significant role in individuals' decisions about entering and staying in a study. Therefore, there is a growing acceptance for paying subjects of biomedical research in a form of monetary or in-kind support. The payment practice, nevertheless, still raises numerous ethical, and practical controversies. They regard all types and forms of research compensation. They are, however, most vivid in case of payment offered as remuneration, i.e., payment provided to individuals for their service as research participants, which exceeds mere recompense for expenses, losses or injuries experienced by participants as a result of their participation.

Some bioethics argue that research participants should not be remunerated for their contribution, because such payment constitutes an ethically unacceptable form of commodification of human body. Moreover, it replaces morality of altruism and solidarity with "a tradesman morality". In contrast, other argue that fair remuneration for research subjects (or at least adult healthy volunteers) is recommended or even morally obligatory. Those, who support the latter view, also share the position that ethically sound payment schemes should avoid both excessive payment and underpayment – as the former raises serious concerns of being overly "seducing" (coercive, unduly inducing), and the latter poses the risk of being attractive mainly for individuals with low social-economic status (exploitive). However, there is no consensus among them (and in relevant regulatory documents) on what "coercion", "undue inducement", and "exploitation" stand for in the context of research payment; how remuneration for research participation should be conceptualized (e.g., as wage, reward, token of appreciation), and no agreement on how an ethically "appropriate" amount of payment should be determined. As a consequence, payment-related policies and practices vary considerably around the world, and investigators and members of research ethics committees are often left without clear guidance on how to develop and evaluate research payment schemes.

The overall scientific goal of this project is to contribute to the development of a conceptually clear, ethically sound and practically feasible ethical framework for offering payment to competent research participants. The goal will be achieved by clarifying and redefining some key issues and concerns raised by the practice of paying research subjects – namely, commodification concern, coercion and undue inducement objection, exploitation and unfairness concerns.

The project will also provide insight into attitudes of members of Polish biomedical research ethics committees (*komisje bioetyczne*) about offers of research payment generally, and the above-mentioned payment-related concerns specifically. Findings of the planned survey will provide evidence-based suggestions for ethically and socially acceptable framework for offering payment to research participants.

The project is expected to enrich global bioethical reflection on the ethics of offering payment to participants of biomedical research by adding the European value perspective. It is hoped that the project's results will contribute to the refinement of payment schemes recommended by appropriate professional and regulatory bodies, or their implementation, thereby on the biomedical research practice.