

International Trials: The Pain, The Pain...

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The most valuable clinical research questions are those that address clinically important outcomes. To provide strong evidence for clinically important outcomes, large numbers of subjects may be required. To obtain large numbers in a timely fashion these trials may need to be run over several sites and, in some cases, in several countries. Running a trial over several sites strengthens the generalisability of the results – the trial doesn't just reflect the quirks of a particular institution or local population – and provides opportunity for hypothesis generating sub group analysis.

There are challenges in running and coordinating international trials. Firstly it requires a network of like minded colleagues. There are some groups and societies that aim to foster these networks such as the Outcomes Research Consortium (www.or.org) and the ANZCA trials group. From what might originally be a small group of colleagues, an international trial can rapidly grow to involve a very large number of people. There must be trust and respect amongst those involved. A formal structure greatly helps. A trial steering committee can provide semi independent oversight. An independent data monitoring and safety committee may directly advise the trial steering committee.

A large trial is expensive; often requiring millions of dollars. While funding agencies are often reluctant to send funds off shore, the international nature of a study does provide the opportunity for the burden of funding to be shared between different national agencies thus each getting more "bang for their buck".

Another headache is the regulatory aspect. Ethics and research governance issues are similar in principle, but in practice may differ substantially between countries. Compared to many overseas countries, ethics and governance approval is relatively quick and easy in Australia. Data flow between countries may be problematic and efforts need to be made to ensure standards of research are maintained across all sites. In the UK and USA there is a far closer scrutiny of clinical research than in Australia. Lastly be mindful of who owns the data and of course authorship.

Setting up and running an international trial is not easy, and indeed for the novice is probably 10 fold harder than originally expected. The principal investigator should expect months to years of sleepless nights worrying. Novice investigators should surround themselves with those who have done it before. But although it is hard work the personal rewards and the value of the knowledge generated easily make the pain worthwhile.

