A systematic review of the use of deception in clinical research

Introduction:

Deception of research subjects typically involves deliberately misleading communication by investigators about the purpose of the research and the nature of experimental procedures [1]. deception is an essential component of the behavioral scientist’s research arsenal, emphasizing the theoretical or social advances one may anticipate from the research, and the avoidance of misleading findings that might result from a study had participants not been deceived[2]. Deception of research participants is used in various contexts such as pain, depression and Parkinson’s disease by experimental manipulation of participants' expectations [3]. Expectation induction mechanisms of verbal suggestion and conditioning have been identified as central processes eliciting placebo and nocebo effects, by decreasing or increasing symptoms respectively, when administering an inert (placebo) treatment or agent [4]

However, deception violates the principle of respect for persons by failing to disclose relevant information that might affect an individual's decision to volunteer for a research study thereby causing distress and lack of trust in research when the deception is revealed [5]. An ethical alternative to the consent procedure in deceptive research is the concept of authorized deception. It alerts prospective participants to the fact that some or all participants will be deliberately deceived about the purpose of the research or the nature of research procedures without disclosing the exact nature of the deception [3]. Debriefing promotes transparency by explaining the deception and its rationale, provides an apology to subjects for infringing the principle of respect for persons, and offers subjects an opportunity to withdraw their data [6]

Hence we have planned this systematic review of the use of deception in clinical research with the objective of studying the trials involving deception in their methodology with respect to various parameters such as study design, presence and type of expectancy manipulation, outcome measures used, benefits, harms and the extent to which ethical measures such as an approval from the institutional ethics committee, consent and debriefing of study participants regarding the use of deception have been followed. Also, the use of authorized deception will be determined.

Aims & Objectives:

1. To study trials using deception as an intervention with respect to study design, outcome measures, type of expectancy manipulation, type of participants, therapeutic areas, participants deceived, benefits & harms
2. To determine the extent of use of ethical measures such as consent, approval from the institutional ethics committee, authorized deception & debriefing towards safeguarding patient autonomy.

Inclusion criteria:

1. English language publications from 1st January 1985 to 28th February 2017 pertaining to completed clinical trials involving deception as an intervention in the methodology will be considered
2. Deceptive studies conducted in human adults

Exclusion criteria:

1. Trials involving minimized deception
2. Trials involving therapeutic misconception
3. Trials involving deception of investigator by participants
4. Reviews, narrative reviews, systematic reviews or meta analyses
5. Guidelines on deception
6. Articles involving analysis of data from trials conducted on a previous date
7. Letters to the editor
8. Case reports
9. Study protocols

Materials & Methods:

Experimental & observational studies involving the use of deception as a part of the methodology will be considered. The search engine PubMed will be screened for obtaining studies pertaining to deception using the key words “balanced placebo”, “expect\* AND manipul\*”, “"Nocebo effect"[MeSH] OR "Nocebo effect"[tiab]”, “"Placebo effect"[MeSH] OR "Placebo effect"[tiab]” and “Deception [tiab] OR deception [mesh] OR deceiving [tiab] OR deceit [tiab] OR deceived [tiab] OR Fraud [mesh] OR "Professional misconduct" [mesh]”. Published literature from 1st January 1985 to 28th February 2017 will be considered. Two reviewers will independently screen the studies that meet the inclusion criteria and any disagreement will be resolved by consensus. The outcomes of interest will be :

1. Study design (parallel/cross-over/factorial/cohort). Also the extent of use of multiple study designs would be assessed. The factorial designs will be further analyzed for the presence of balanced placebo design.
2. Nature of the participant (patients/healthy volunteers)
3. Randomized versus non-randomized studies
4. Controlled versus uncontrolled studies
5. Blinding (single blind/ double blind/open label)
6. Therapeutic areas in which deception is used
7. Outcome measures (subjective/objective)
8. Expectancy manipulation (extent of use of multiple manipulations)
9. Ethical issues:
10. Health & psychological risks (definite/partial)
11. Benefit to the participant & society (definite/partial)
12. Use of ethical alternatives such as authorized deception & debriefing
13. Mention of written informed consent having been obtained from study participants. Also the trials in which only verbal consent is sought will be assessed.
14. Mention of approval from institutional ethics committee for the trial

Data Analysis:

The results will be entered in a pre-determined data extraction sheet. Individual percentages of all outcomes of interest will be calculated.

Discussion:

Through this review we propose to provide a concise overview of studies using deception for answering a research question. We would be able to enlist the various methods used for manipulation of response expectancies and thereby determine the commonest method used for the same. In addition we can understand the ethical problems involved in such studies and the attempts made by researchers to alleviate them.

References:

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3. Miller FG, Wendler D, Swartzman LC. Deception in Research on the Placebo Effect. PLoS Med. 2005 Sep; 2(9): 262
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