Select committees ROUND UP

CLINICAL TRIALS

We must start respecting participants in clinical trials and end this biased under-reporting of research, says **Iain Chalmers**

On average, proposed new treatments are only very slightly more likely than not to be better than existing treatments. Furthermore, there is no reliable way of predicting which among proposed new treatments will turn out to be therapeutic advances. Well-designed clinical trials are thus essential for identifying the real advances in treatment among the many hoped-for advances. As the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee put it when introducing its recently published report: "Clinical trials are the experimental foundation on which modern medicine is built."

The Committee was prompted to inquire into 'clinical trials and disclosure of data' partly because the number of clinical trials in the UK has fallen, and partly because, as publicised in Ben Goldcare's bestselling book *Bad Pharma,* important evidence from clinical trials is being hidden from the public. Clinical trials suggesting that treatments have beneficial effects are twice as likely as others to be published, so prescribers and patients are having to make treatment choices using biased information. The publicly available evidence leaves the impression that treatments are better and safer than they actually are.

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The Committee makes some useful

recommendations to tackle this serious situation and it must be hoped that the Government will tackle a problem to which several parliamentary committees have previously drawn attention.

Biased under-reporting of research is not only unscientific; it is also unethical. People participate in clinical trials for a variety of reasons, but all of them assume that they are contributing to a growth of knowledge. Failure to report the results of studies that could not have been done without their help betrays the trust that they showed when they agreed to take part. The Science and Technology Committee might have emphasised to a greater extent than it did this ethical dimension of the issue it was investigating.

Patients are not simply 'research fodder' for clinical scientists. They are essential participants in what should be a shared mission with health professionals and researchers to generate evidence that can help to improve health care for themselves and others. One of the most heartening of the Committee's recommendations is that:

"The Government should ensure that all trials listed on the [Clinical Trials] Gateway include a plain language summary written specifically for a lay audience. Where such summaries are not already in existence, the Government must be prepared to commit the time and effort needed to create them."

Patients and potential participants in clinical trials have been asking for this information for many years. It is high time that they are shown the respect they deserve by providing it, and by ensuring that all the studies to which they have contributed are published.

Iain Chalmers is coordinator of the James Lind Initiative