

## **Protocol for Reimbursement of Research Participants**

The purpose of this protocol is to consider the ethical issues raised by the use of reimbursements or incentives in research.

Recruitment strategies pose ethical issues insofar as they threaten to distort the researcher-participant relationship, exploit potential research participants, influence risks and benefits, interfere with informed consent or violate confidentiality or privacy. Recruitment techniques represent the initial communication or contact with potential participants and may influence their understanding and expectations of research and the voluntariness of their participation. The question of compensating or paying research participants raises ethical questions, but there is no clear guidance or consensus on this topic.

Payments can be to reimburse expenses, to compensate for time, inconvenience and possible discomfort, to show a token appreciation for participants' help and expertise, or to pay for people's help but it is important to ensure that such payment will not interfere with the voluntariness of their consent by acting as an undue inducement. There are three central ethical considerations when reimbursing research participants or using monetary incentives. Such payments should not be such as to interfere with the voluntariness of consent, commodify the research process or act as an undue inducement to participants.

The use of payment as an "incentive" to participation is controversial. One of the underlying principles in the ESRC's Framework for Research Ethics (2010) is that "Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion". In this regard; incentive payments can be seen as coercive, or as exerting undue influence on potential participants' decisions about whether to take part in research. A particular concern is that participants from financially disadvantaged groups may be more vulnerable to this kind of concern – as they need the money, and their consent may not be "freely given" if payment is involved.

There are strong arguments for the use of incentives. A 'business' perspective argues that incentives reduce refusal rates, therefore saving valuable research time. But it is misleading to see them as merely a mechanism to bolster response rates. Payment might also be viewed as fee for a service, in other words, for participants' time, knowledge and experience. It has been argued that it is ethical practice to pay socially and economically vulnerable participants for their time because it provides them with the dignity of employment and economic reward for their labour.

A further concern is how the payment is made. Cash payments can have implications in terms of, for example, participants' benefit payments or taxation (if it can be construed as "income") and can raise concerns about what the cash may be used for (for example, drug users buying drugs). Such concerns may make the use of vouchers as payment preferable.

It is important that payment does not override the principles of freely given and fully informed consent. It is imperative that participants know, before they start the research, that they can withdraw from the study at any time without losing their payment. An alternative option to payment is offering a free prize draw. The Market Research Society has published useful

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guidance on using free prize draws, and it is worth consulting these if researchers are planning to use this method.

Given the ethical concerns surrounding payment for research participation, Research Ethics Committees will scrutinize any plans to pay research participants with some consideration. For any research proposing to make any kind of payment to participants it is important that careful consideration is given as to *why* it is necessary, and *how* it is done. The following points should be considered:

- Guidelines should be developed for when and how payment is made;
- A clear and explicit justification for paying participants should be given to the Ethics Committee;
- Careful consideration should be given to any cases where there is concern that people are consenting because of payment and not because they wish to take part and;
- A general policy should be developed for describing payments in the consent process.

### Reimbursement and Payment

A distinction is usually drawn between reimbursement and payment. Reimbursement is meant to cover the actual costs to the participant of taking part in the research. These include out of pocket expenses such as travel costs which is a particularly important consideration when participants may not have the economic resources to take part in the research. Reimbursement may also be for participants' time which raises more concerns because the line between payment and reimbursement can be blurred. For instance in the case of gamete (sperm and egg) donation in the UK the SEED (Sperm, Egg and Embryo Donation) Report<sup>1</sup> concluded that reimbursements for loss of earnings should be set at the same level as for jury service – a level considered sufficiently small that individuals would not be encouraged to donate in order to claim reimbursement for loss of earnings. Overall, the conclusion by the Report was that the process of donation should be “expense neutral” for the donor. It was acceptable for them to claim expenses incurred through the donation process e.g. travel and parking expenses or child care costs, but not for them to make a profit through their donation. Factors considered were whether offering payment would be ethically inappropriate in fundamentally altering the relationship of sperm and egg donation (this is similar to arguments in tissue and blood donation), removing the altruism of the act and whether it would act as an incentive for individuals to withhold important medical information. There was also the concern that it would discourage donors from fully, and reflectively considering the risks involved, and the concern that if actual loss of earnings was reimbursed, (as different individuals would have different

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<sup>1</sup> Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. SEED Report: A Report on the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority's Review of Sperm, Egg and Embryo Donation in the United Kingdom. Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, 2005. <http://www.hfea.gov.uk/docs/SEEDReport05.pdf>

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levels of loss of earnings) this might instigate a market in donation, or encourage clinics to accept donations from “cheaper” donors.

### **Remuneration of Research Participants**

On this basis research participants may be reasonably remunerated for their time, expenses, inconvenience and for the degree of discomfort they may experience while participating in a research study. The remuneration should not be so large however, as to induce individuals to participate in the research against their better judgement. All remuneration, reimbursements or in kind services must be approved by a Faculty Research Ethics Committee or Health Institute Research Ethics Committee (or NHS REC in the case of NHS approved research). The amount and schedule of all payments should be presented to the FREC at the time of the initial review. The FREC should review both the amount of payment and the proposed method and timing of payment to assure that neither is coercive or present undue influence. Information regarding payments to participants must be included in the relevant information sheets. Payment in cash or kind to participants must only be for costs such as travel expenses, child-care expenses, meals or recognition of their time.

Some researchers want to offer participants more than simple reimbursement for participation. Many researchers feel that it is right to acknowledge the contribution made by participants to their research and, perhaps, to incline participants towards participation without offering rewards so great as to be irresistible and therefore coercive. These kinds of benefits, which may not take the form of cash (e.g. free DVDs or other goods) can sometimes be inducements and the difficulty is in deciding what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in terms of the level of reward offered. The notion of undue inducement often turns on the assumption that autonomy is undermined by circumstances that are stacked in favour of one decision or another (e.g. overwhelming need or irresistible reward).

Where reimbursements are provided (in cash, vouchers or goods) participants should be asked to sign a form to acknowledge receipt of the payment.