



How to Raise Physician and Public Awareness of Your Clinical Research Trials

by Joelle R. Machia, R.N.

The cooperation and participation of physicians are essential to successful recruitment in clinical trials. A small but consistent body of research suggests that patients will rarely enter a trial unless a physician actively recommends it or supports the patient's participation.

In my experience as a clinical research nurse at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, Wash., two major factors have impeded physician support. One is fear of losing the patient to a competing clinician or a more formidable institution. The second is the fear of increasing the workload of an already overburdened office practice. These concerns must be addressed directly, and physicians must be reassured that the trial investigator has the staff and resources to conduct the trial without added burden to the physician's practice.

The first contact with private physicians can be made at the launch of a new study. Send these practitioners a letter with study details—a fast-fact sheet—and make sure you provide the name of a contact person. If a specific patient has already expressed interest in participating in the trial, say that you are advising the patient to include the physician in the decision process. Doing so helps the physician to feel like a part of the research team. If possible, make a follow-up call after the letter is sent so you can answer questions and share ideas.

A personal relationship with your community physicians is a powerful recruitment tool. Contacting a large number of physicians is a formidable task, especially with limited resources. Instead, approach a few key practitioners within a large prac-

tice or medical group. Tapping into friendship networks can be productive as well. Form a focus group of strategically selected physicians and seek their advice on recruitment. We have found that these actions stimulate excitement, and the physicians may take some ownership for the trial's success. Once they are on board, word of mouth and the weight of their reputations will aid your recruitment efforts.

Acknowledge each physician who helps you. When a potential study participant contacts me, I always ask how he or she heard about the trial. If physicians have referred a participant, I immediately send them a letter thanking them for the referral and their support. A certificate or plaque applauding the physician's notable service in the crusade to conquer cancer can be a wonderful acknowledgement and can be proudly displayed in the physician's office. Physicians also appreciate public acknowledgement of their efforts in newsletters, local newspapers, or hospital staff meetings.

Once relationships have been established, they need to be maintained and nurtured. Continue to update physicians at least annually about their patients who are participating in the trial, thank them for their ongoing support, and enclose study updates.

Your next challenge is to drum up media interest, which can bring more public awareness to a clinical trial than the largest direct mailing would ever be able to do and is an excellent use of limited financial resources. While TV news and large newspapers are terrific sources to target, small town local papers, hospital and community newsletters, and local radio stations can

also give you excellent exposure.

TV news stories where a real participant shares his or her story brought us the greatest success to date. From one news story alone, we received more than 200 calls from prospective participants. But be careful! Give a great deal of thought to the participant you choose for a TV news interview. An unpleasant personality or inarticulate voice does not benefit your cause. The audience needs to be able to both identify with a participant and feel that the individual is intelligent and trustworthy.

When dealing with the media, you must be willing to assume and manage certain risks since you don't fully control the message that a reporter will convey. A misunderstanding on a reporter's part can have a negative impact on your trial and may seriously damage recruitment efforts. Take time to make sure the reporter has a good understanding of the study, and make yourself available for any follow-up questions. During the interview, keep the environment relaxed, fun, and upbeat. After the story airs, always follow up and acknowledge the reporter's contribution. ☐

Joelle R. Machia, R.N., is a clinical research nurse at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, Wash. She has served as the program coordinator for the Study on Tamoxifen and Raloxifene (STAR) and for the Breast Cancer Prevention Trial (BCPT). Since 1994 she has served on the National Coordinator Committee for BCPT and STAR, which are conducted by the National Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project and sponsored by the National Cancer Institute.