



## The Great American Cookie Experiment

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Looking for ways to increase research interest in your organization? We formed a Nursing Research Task Force, studied basic research concepts, and invited our colleagues to join us in The Great American Cookie Experiment, a mock clinical trial designed to awaken interest and demystify the research process.<sup>1,2</sup>

Devised by a nursing instructor<sup>1</sup> at Washington State University in 1986 and replicated 15 years later at a large academic medical center<sup>2</sup> in North Carolina, this fun research was conducted in May 2009, by 22 nurses at Pardee Hospital, home to Pardee's Community Comprehensive Cancer Center in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Working around the clock to cover all shifts, we accrued 353 subjects to the study in 48 hours.

Leading up to those 48 hours, the nurses learned about:

- The Institutional Review Board (IRB)
- The planning that goes into developing a research study
- How to draft a research protocol
- The elements of research informed consent forms
- Essentials of data collection tools
- The data collection process
- How to maintain the integrity of the study
- Simple data analysis.

We presented our proposal for The Great American Cookie Experiment to our IRB and soon gained expedited approval for our research.

### What is the Great American Cookie Experiment?

So what's involved in this innovative project? Participants are invited

to read and sign a research consent form. The consent is exchanged for a research questionnaire, a small cup of water, and two different chocolate chip cookies labeled cookie A and cookie B. Subjects are instructed to taste cookie A, take a sip of water, and taste cookie B. They then fill in the data collection tool, which asks questions about the two cookies, the best cookie, their favorite cookie, and subject demographics.

Pre-research publicity via posters, emails, and the hospital newsletter, plus the research nurses' enthusiasm for the topic drove many subjects to our study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The offer of two free chocolate chip cookies made our research appealing to the sample of nurses, physicians, and other associates we looked for, night and day, during the 48-hour time period.

The research nurses were easily spotted throughout the hospital wearing their large purple "I Support Nursing Research" stickers and pushing carts full of research supplies. They cautioned subjects on the

need for confidentiality in word and facial expression during the research, a feat that sometimes proved challenging. Nurses worked in teams of three, one explaining the research and giving the consent form, one giving the cookies and questionnaires in exchange for a signed consent form, and one collecting completed surveys or going for more supplies, if needed.

All research supplies were stored in a locked education classroom during the 48 hours of the study, accessible only by Security and the Staff Development Director. At the end of the 48 hours, the data were entered into a password-protected computer in the locked office of one of the research nurses.

### What was the Difference in the Cookies?

Both were chocolate chip cookies, one purchased pre-mixed ready to bake as most cafeteria cookies are, the other mixed from scratch. All cookies were baked in our kitchen and delivered to the locked research supply room in clear-lidded plastic

cookie trays labeled cookie A or cookie B. Although there was much curiosity about how the cookies were different and even allegiance to cookie A or B, this was a double-blind study and only the Nutrition Services Director knew. After data analysis was complete, he explained the difference in the cookies and revealed the answers.

While we could share the results with you, we'd rather encourage you to conduct The Great American Cookie Experiment in your organization and



Lynn Jones, RNIII, OCN, explains The Great American Cookie Experiment to Janice Farmer, RNIII, OCN, as oncologist Jim Radford, MD, participates in the research.

## To Help You Get Started

### Chocolate Chip Cookies

- 2¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- ½ cup butter and ½ cup Crisco-butter, softened
- ½ cup brown sugar
- ½ cup white sugar
- 1 (3.4 oz.) package instant vanilla pudding
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 2 eggs

- 12 oz. chocolate chips
- 1 cup chopped pecans

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Combine the flour and baking soda and set aside. Mix the butters, brown sugar, white sugar, pudding mix, and vanilla. Beat until creamy. Add eggs one at a time and mix well, gradually stirring in the flour mixture. Next, stir in the chocolate chips and nuts. Drop mixture by teaspoon on to ungreased cookie sheet. Bake at 375 degrees for 8-10

minutes, until golden brown. To change it up, consider substituting a different flavor of pudding or adding different chips, for example butterscotch pudding and butterscotch or white chocolate chips. Enjoy!

*Recipe courtesy of Lu Anne Bankert, senior director, Programs and Meetings, Association of Community Cancer Centers, Rockville, Md.*



see the effect you get. From our perspective, the real results of this study were in the knowledge gained about the research process by nurses who had never conducted research and by their colleagues who had never participated in a research study.

### Programmatic Benefits

Nurses on the newly created Nursing Research Task Force were amazed at all the details and steps involved in preparing for their initial research study. They were delighted when what seemed complicated turned into a well coordinated, fun, interactive learning experience. They laughed along with participants commenting on the risk factor of a possible weight gain from eating the two cookies. They were surprised with how thoroughly most people read the consent form, and they answered questions that arose as their colleagues stopped and took time to think about research.

James E. Radford, MD, medical oncologist, was one of several physi-



cians who took part in The Great American Cookie Experiment. Well known for his success in enrolling new cancer patients in clinical trials, Dr. Radford received the David King Community Clinical Scientist Award at ACCC's 2009 Annual Meeting in Baltimore. While he does like chocolate chip cookies, Dr. Radford noted that there was a serious side to the fun. "This 48-hour focus on research was a great way to get people thinking and talking about research and heighten everyone's awareness of the possibilities and importance of clinical research," he said.

If you're looking for ways to

increase research interest in your organization, The Great American Cookie Experiment may be just what you're looking for. Contact us or check the references for additional information. Research? Cookies! Enjoy! 🍪

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### References

<sup>1</sup>Thiel CA. The cookie experiment: A creative teaching strategy. *Nurse Educator*. 1987;12(3):8-10.

<sup>2</sup>Hudson-Barr D, Weeks, SK, Watters C. Introducing the staff nurse to nursing research through the Great American Cookie Experiment. *J Nurs Adm*. 2002;9: 440-3.