

Drug trials pose risk for patients, kept under regulation

Ghady Haidar

The Zooming Into Health Ethics Committee (ZIHEC) held its second event on January 16, this time focusing on the ethics of patient participation in drug trials. The audience was presented with a scenario involving a patient who is led to believe that he has Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) after reading a magazine advertisement recruiting participants for new drug trials.

Keith Cash, visiting professor at the School of Nursing, pointed out that such advertisements are potentially misleading, as they are “issued by pharmaceutical companies that are only concerned with business ethics, which, in itself, is actually an oxymoron.” Profit-making companies are interested in “research for money instead of research for research,” and have been known to be “involved in fraud, result-suppression, and false data. They may [even] exaggerate the numbers by up to 20 times when it comes to medical research.”

Ethical problems stop if research on humans is banned entirely, but that would “halt the development of new treatments.” What major companies do in order to “safeguard the interests of human subjects is to insist on their informed consent,” but even that is problematic. Often, patients may not truly “understand how becoming a research participant will affect them, despite informed consent,” and may become convinced that they actually have the disease even if they only present with a fraction of the symptoms. This is “especially true for something like GAD,” where symptoms include things as “common as chronic sleep deprivation” and as vague as “feeling anxious.” In the west, university students who sign up for drug trials may be completely oblivious to what is going on but are usually paid “a few thousand dollars to be involved in particular trials and experiment on their bodies”

Cash explains that it is impractical for the participant to be told everything the researcher knows about the trial, which is where “trust and therefore regulation” come in. In the UK, General Practitioners are “paid to recruit patients into clinical trials,” but it is usually “extremely well-regulated.” One audience member, Karim Masri, said that he has been involved in clinical trials at AUH before, and they have all been “extremely organized and professional. The researchers spend hours going over the entire experiment with you to make sure that you understand exactly what is going on.”

ZIHEC is a part of the Lebanese Medical Students’ International Committee’s Standing Committee on Medical Education (LeMSIC SCOME). Its previous event was on the ethics of genetic testing.