SWAT 138: Improving participant retention using a pen as an incentive with the reminder for a postal follow-up questionnaire

Objective of this SWAT
To assess the impact on response rates of including a pen with the reminder for the four-month follow-up trial questionnaire

Study area: Retention
Sample type: Participants
Estimated funding level needed: Low

Background
Comprehensive and effective retention methods are important in randomised trials to minimise the amount of missing data and reduce the possibility of introducing bias (1). To improve the retention of trial participants, studies might include various monetary and non-monetary strategies aimed at keeping participants in the trial (2, 3). There is some evidence to suggest that including a pen with a postal follow-up questionnaire has a positive impact on response rates and reduces the number of reminders required (4). In theory, including a pen not only facilitates the completion of the paper questionnaire, but also acts as an acknowledgement of the participant's help with the study, making the recipient more likely to complete it. However, many participants will return their questionnaire even if an incentive is not included. Therefore, rather than waste valuable resources by sending the incentive to everyone, it may only be necessary to send an incentive to those who do not initially respond.

Participants in the FIREFLI study (NCT04717258) will be sent a follow-up postal questionnaire four months after randomisation. Participants who do not return this questionnaire within two weeks will be sent up to two reminder letters plus a copy of the questionnaire by post followed by a telephone call two weeks later. This SWAT is an embedded randomised trial to evaluate the effectiveness of including a pen with the first reminder letter for participants who do not return their four-month questionnaire within two weeks of it being sent. For logistical reasons, all participants due to be sent a four-month questionnaire will be randomised into the SWAT. However, only those due to be sent the reminder for this questionnaire will be included in the analysis. Participants who withdraw from follow-up before their four-month questionnaire is due and those for whom it is not necessary to send a reminder letter will be excluded from the SWAT. Participants will be randomised using block randomisation, stratified by the main trial allocation, with randomly varying block sizes. They will be allocated in a 1:1 ratio to receive either a pen or no pen with their reminder questionnaire. The allocation schedule will be generated by a York Trials Unit statistician otherwise not involved in sending out the questionnaires. As is usual with an embedded trial within a trial, no formal power calculation will be undertaken for the study, because the sample size will be constrained by the number of participants who require the reminder letter.

Interventions and comparators
Intervention 1: Pen printed with the University of York, York Trials Unit, logo will be included with the first reminder for the four-month questionnaire
Intervention 2: First reminder for the four-month questionnaire will be sent without a pen

Index Type: Method of Follow-up

Method for allocating to intervention or comparator
Randomisation

Outcome measures
Primary: The proportion of participants in each SWAT group who return the questionnaire.
Secondary: 1. Time to response (length of time taken to return the questionnaire); 2. Completeness of response (the number of questions completed).

Analysis plans
The proportion of participants returning the questionnaire will be compared using logistic regression to estimate the odds ratio, 95% confidence interval and p-value. The time to response

(from date the reminder is sent) will be assessed by a Cox proportional hazards model, and completeness of response by a linear regression model. All models will adjust for main trial allocation.

Possible problems in implementing this SWAT

Participants will not have the opportunity to provide their informed consent for their involvement in this SWAT, but we will ask the ethics committee to approve our request to waiver consent. We do not consider this to be a major ethical issue. Participation in the SWAT has no other implications or consequences on any other element of participation in the trial.

References

1. Akl EA, Briel M, You JJ, Sun X, Johnston BC, Busse JW, et al. Potential impact on estimated treatment effects of information lost to follow-up in randomised controlled trials (LOST-IT): systematic review. BMJ. 2012;344:e2809.
2. Gillies K, Kearney A, Keenan C, Treweek S, Hudson J, Brueton VC, et al. Strategies to improve retention in randomised trials. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2021;(3):MR000032.
3. Jia P, Furuya-Kanamori L, Qin Z-S, Jia P-Y, Xu C. Association between response rates and monetary incentives in sample study: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Postgraduate Medical Journal 2020 (online ahead of print: 26 August 2020).
4. Bell K, Clark L, Fairhurst C, Mitchell N, Lenaghan E, Blacklock J, et al. Enclosing a pen reduced time to response to questionnaire mailings. Journal of Clinical Epidemiology 2016;74:144-50.

Publications or presentations of this SWAT design

Examples of the implementation of this SWAT

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Date of idea: 24/NOV/2020
Revisions made by:
Date of revisions: