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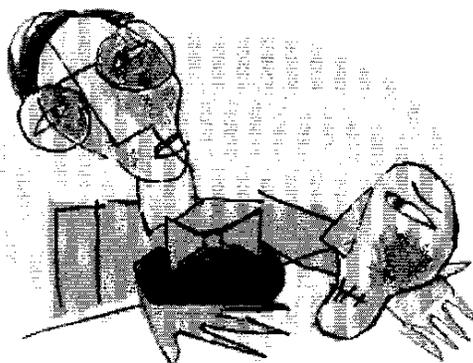
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Should Research Subjects Be Given Free Drugs After a Successful Study?

Is it wrong to give poor patients free medication? (ABCNEWS.com)

By Jonathan D. Moreno, Ph.D.
Special to ABCNEWS.com



THE DILEMMA

Recently, Irish researchers announced dramatic results for a vaccine that might prevent Alzheimer's disease, which afflicts 3 million to 4 million Americans. So far, the vaccine has been tested only in mice, but the company that makes it is seeking approval for human testing and it'll be recruiting people to test the compound.

Every year, thousands of sick people are recruited for experiments on new substances, such as the Alzheimer's vaccine, that may help their illness. Often the research is paid for by drug companies. Some people in these studies have inadequate health insurance or none at all. The only way for them to get treatment is to sign up for experiments.

Often, of course, the experimental drugs do the subjects no good at all — after all, the experiments are being done to find out if the medications work. Sometimes the new treatments turn out to be quite effective.

These human tests of drugs are usually done in a "blinded" fashion: Neither the research subjects nor the scientists know who's getting the real drug and who's getting a sugar pill or other placebo. So those who are sick and sign up for the study in hopes of

SUMMARY

Some suggest that human 'guinea pigs' deserve free treatment

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getting useful treatment might not be getting the potentially helpful drug at all.

The people who agree to be in these studies are told all of this when they sign up. They also know that they might not be able to get the new drug after the study is over, even if it turns out to work. Even so, some question the fairness of this system. They argue that, if the drug being tested proves to be beneficial, those who volunteer for such experiments should then receive the medication for free if they have little or no health insurance coverage.

THE PROS

People who are sick, poor, lack health insurance and don't qualify for Medicaid are among the most vulnerable in our society. In their position, it's a stretch to say they're "volunteering" for a medical study. And it's unfair to give them a drug that provides relief from their illness and then take it away after the experiment is over.

Research volunteers are basically giving their bodies to science.

They don't know if they'll respond to the drug at all (*if* they get the real thing instead of a placebo), and it might even make them sicker. They're doing a service for the rest of us who might benefit from these drugs someday, and that service should be recognized.

A system in which experiment subjects were given safe and effective drugs for free would also relieve them of the need to go from one study to another trying to get treatment.

THE CONS

The poor and sick are already in a bad position to resist being in studies. If they knew they would get the successful study drugs without charge it would be even harder for them to decide freely not to take part in an experiment.

The research system shouldn't be asked to bear the burden of an inadequate health care system. Providing people with drugs this way would take too much pressure off of society to create a system that takes care of everyone's health needs.

Knowing that they might incur the expense of dispensing free medications to human subjects after successful trials, drug companies might be unwilling to recruit people who don't have adequate health insurance. That would close a door for those who have

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no other options to obtain new treatment.

HOW WOULD YOU DECIDE?

This dilemma is likely to get worse as more and more drugs are being tested. Should the experimental drugs that turn out to work be provided free to human subjects who can't otherwise afford them? What do you think? ■

To read more about Dr. Moreno and his colleagues, visit the Web site of the [University of Virginia's Center for Bioethics](#).

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