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Abstract Information

Abstract Title: A systematic review of the use of deception as an intervention in clinical research
Abstract: Background When deception is used to test research hypotheses, a conflict ensues between the means and ends. We conducted a systematic review of the use of deception as an intervention in clinical research to explore the context of studies that used deception and the ethical issues therein. Methods PubMed and Google searches were done using key words such as “expectancy manipulation” “deception” AND “clinical trials”. We included English language publications between 1991 and 2015 and assessed study design, who was deceived, whether there was expectancy manipulation (EM), methods of EM, therapeutic areas, outcome measures, benefits, whether not more than minimal risk, whether deception was authorized, and if debriefing was done. Results A total of 71 articles were included. A parallel group design was used in 43/71 (61%) and crossover in 18/71 (25%) studies. A total of 61/71 (86%) studies were randomized, 67/71 (94%) controlled and 45/71 (63%) single blind.
Most studies [47/71 (66%)] were conducted in healthy participants and 23/71 (32%) were in patients. Primarily, placebo response in diverse therapeutic areas such as bronchial asthma, Parkinson's disease and pain was studied. The nature of deception was largely EM (66/71; 93%) and the method used was verbal suggestion. Outcome measures included VAS, pain scores and fMRI. There were no direct benefits in 52/71 (73%) studies and risk was not more than minimal in 62/71 (87%). A majority of studies (48/71; 68%) deceived all participants. Authorized deception was used in only one study. Debriefing was done in a little over half the studies. Conclusions Deception has been used as an intervention in a wide variety of clinical conditions, raising ethical issues such as risk-benefit imbalance and lack of use of authorized deception. It appears necessary to develop guidelines for ethical review, conduct and publication of research involving deception.