VolREthics Initiative - Volunteers in Research and Ethics

Latin America Workshop, December 12, 2022

"Focus on the risks of exploitation of healthy volunteers in biomedical research in Latin America"

Meeting report

Meeting agenda:

Introduction by the co-chairs (13:00 – 13:10 pm)
Valeria Fink – Fundación Huesped , Argentina
Liliana Lopez Carvajal – PECET, Colombia

The VolREthics Initiative - Learning from the previous meetings (13:10 – 13:30 pm)
François Bompart - DNDi Switzerland & Inserm Ethics Committee, France

How to protect HV from exploitation: Latin-American perspectives (13:30 – 14:30)

- Gustavo Bernardes F. Oliveira. Instituto Dante Pazzanese de Cardiologia (CoChair, Institutional Review Board) and Hospital Alemão Oswaldo Cruz, Brazil (Medical Manager, International Research Center)
- Valeria Fink. Fundación Huesped, Argentina (NGO, Research Center)
- Danilo C.G. Bedor. NUDFAC-UFPE Bioanalytical Manager, Brazil (Federal University of Pernambuco)

Perspectives from healthy volunteers (14:30-15:15)

Open discussion: Identified risks of exploitation and recommendations (15:15 – 16:00 pm)

Next steps (16:00 pm)
François Bompart on behalf of Inserm Ethics Committee, France.

Attendees: a total of 37 persons registered to attend the meeting, from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela, including 4 healthy volunteers from Colombia and one from Brazil.

Introductory presentations were made

1. Perspectives were provided from international research centres in Brazil, Hospital Alemão Oswaldo Cruz and Instituto Dante Pazzanese de Cardiologia, São Paulo. The inclusion of ethical aspects in all steps of research was highlighted, and processes to ensure appropriate reviews were detailed. A review of the clinicaltrials.gov data base showed 183 studies "that accept healthy volunteers" in Brazil, mostly related with communicable diseases. "Plataforma Brasil" is a government-supported platform that provides information to study participants (patients and healthy volunteers) through a variety of Web contents and documents.
2. Perspectives from Argentina were then shared, detailing the processes set up by ANMAT, the national regulatory agency, to protect biomedical studies participants. Specific regulations exist for clinical pharmacology studies "Dispo. ANMAT 6677/2010 (REGIMEN DE BUENA PRACTICA CLINICA PARA ESTUDIOS DE FARMACOLOGIA CLINICA)". These detail the required documentation, the Good Clinical Practice regulations and inspection possibilities that relate to clinical pharmacology studies. There is another regulation for research with human subjects (Res.1480/2011-Guía para Investigaciones con Seres Humanos) with detailed required documentation and processes. A lot of emphasis is placed on the monitoring of studies, and on the need for investigators to be constantly trained on local and international regulations, as well as the importance of their role as primary contact persons for healthy volunteers.
3. A third presentation reviewed Brazilian regulations that were developed over time to provide an ethical framework to protect research participants. The experience of a research centre specialised in bioavailability/bioequivalence studies was shared. This centre managed 47 studies between 2001 and 2018, involving nearly 1200 healthy volunteers and has developed specific processes for their recruitment and for the running of studies.

During the meeting, 5 healthy volunteers shared their insights on their involvement in biomedical research studies.

The 4 volunteers from Colombia were all involved in a COVID-19 vaccine trial after volunteering based on a Web-based announcement calling for volunteers. One volunteer (lawyer by training) had also been involved in other biological sampling studies. In accordance with Colombian regulations, none received payment for their participation, only minor expenses (travel) were reimbursed. All stated altruism as their primary motivation to participate (to help science, help the world get out of the pandemic, learn about interesting things, do something positive, etc.). All expressed great satisfaction about the clarity of information received, the availability of investigators and staff to answer their queries. They also expressed satisfaction at being properly informed before providing their consent, and regularly informed of their right to withdraw from the study. The involvement of third-party witnesses was also appreciated. One volunteer felt reassured to be part of the study as a way to get regular blood pressure check-ups since hypertension was detected during a screening visit. One of them said that some relatives expressed distrust in the safety of vaccinations and used the term "guinea pig" to speak about her study participation.

Overall, all 4 persons reported extremely positive experiences and were willing to get involved again.

The Brazilian volunteer a Pharmacy student of the Federal University of Pernambuco, heard about the research recruitment during a class. His motivation to participate was his desire to be actively involved in the defence of science, which is often under attack nowadays. The study was very short, his participation only took two days – however, he had to stay a at the study site for long periods on each day, including early beginning which meant waking up early to go to site each day, and felt this difficult to manage considering his other commitments around the city.

When it comes to improvement opportunities, the volunteer believed that the study and its recruitment could have been more publicized, as participants recruitment was challenging.

He did not receive any specific remuneration or food for this trial, and his travel expenses were also not covered as he was already in the University. The volunteer reported that he was very happy to join the study and he enjoyed the experience.

Improvement opportunities were mentioned by the healthy volunteeers:

- Simplify informed consent documents. One volunteer, who happened to be a lawyer, felt the documents were too long, too detailed and with vocabulary that might not be easily understood by all.
- Information platforms for international vaccine trials were seen as a useful resource by the volunteers, some of them had used it. The need to request an interpreter was seen as a bit burdensome, language-specific calling numbers would be a better option.

Insights were provided in the following areas

- Payment to volunteers: regulations in Colombia prevent paying healthy volunteers, only allowing reimbursement of expenses. Healthy volunteers are usually not paid in Argentina either, however, compensation can be offered for situations such as inability to work during a lengthy study. Regulation 1480 covers these situations, which must be stated in the informed consent and approved by the ethics committee. Brazil does allow payments to healthy volunteers taking part in pharmacokinetic and Phase I studies. No information was communicated regarding other Latin American countries.

- Centralised clinical studies registries: exist in Argentina and in Brazil. In Brazil, called SINEB (Sistema de informacoes de estudos de equivalencia farmaceutica e bioequivalencia), its use is mandatory for registering bioavailability / bioequivalence studies. Information on Phase I studies in SINEB is not mandatory, but can be required by the national regulatory agency, Anvisa. National registries could enable getting data on the numbers and types of studies involving healthy volunteers in relevant countries.

- Healthy volunteers' registries: a registry exists in Brazil, managed by the Ministry of Health. Part of the SINEB system, its use is required for volunteers participating in bioavailability / bioequivalence studies[1]. The registry is called CNVB (Cadastro Nacional de Voluntários em Estudos de Bioequivalência). It uses volunteers' national identification numbers ("Cadastro

[1] RESOLUÇÃO RDC Nº 634, DE 24 DE MARÇO DE 2022 – ANVISA.
https://alimentusconsultoria.com.br/resolucao-rdc-no-634-de-24-de-marco-de-2022-anvisa/

de Pessoas Físicas CPF") and is used to ensure that a 6-months minimum period is respected between studies.

- Informed consent: several participants as well as members of the regulatory team expressed their interest in continuously trying to improve informed consent processes and, especially, documents.

- Need to share positive experiences on people volunteering for study participations, to offset the negative perception of "human guinea pigs".