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LETTERS

CLINICAL TRIALS IN COVID-19

Managing clinical trials for covid-19: the importance of ethics committees

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In the global outbreak of covid-19, people are self-isolating at home, cities are blocked, and schools, museums, and stores are closed.[1] Medical students and retired doctors are convened to deal with covid-19,[2 3] but there are still no effective drugs or vaccines.

The World Health Organization's 2016 guidance on ethical issues in infectious diseases says that, during an infectious outbreak, research has an important role in finding new strategies for disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment.[4] We urgently need more effective drugs and diagnostic strategies. Despite the urgent situation, we shouldn't conduct clinical trials in excess without supervision. The safety and quality of clinical trials must be guaranteed.

On 24 March, the Chinese Clinical Trial Register had 471 registered items related to covid-19 and ClinicalTrials.gov had 143.[5 6] If ethics committees cannot review such a large number of clinical trials to a high standard, many high risk and low benefit drugs will be used on patients with covid-19. Not only will patients be in danger, but more meaningful research might miss out on resources. Zhang and colleagues reported the experience of high efficiency and quality ethical review at one hospital in China and summarised the common issues.[7] The studies of covid-19 were reviewed by emergency video conference to avoid social contact, which ensured the important research could be implemented scientifically and timely.

Ethics committees have a vital role in the review of covid-19 studies during the outbreak, especially intervention studies that might cause physical injury to patients. Ethics committees need not only to improve the review efficiency, but also to make sure the standard of ethical review is not relaxed.

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