

Investigating treatment recommendations

The Latin American infectious-disease hospital identified in the protocol you have in front of you, is proposing research into the remedies that drug sellers and pharmacists are recommending for the treatment of diarrhoea. The hospital is interested in this because they want to develop educational materials for both the drug sellers and patients. They, therefore, need to know local practices.

They have a secondary goal of wanting to know whether counterfeit drugs are being sold in the area.

The principle investigator believes that the majority of drug sellers would not answer him truthfully if he or members of his research team were to identify themselves as researchers before interviewing them. So he has decided to undertake a study that requires some deception. We are hoping the ethics committee can give us some guidance on this because we know that the use of mystery clients can be tricky.

The research protocol proposes to employ four young men, dressed as villagers, to individually approach a number of different drug sellers for advice on how to treat a 2-year old boy who is at home with fever and diarrhoea. These men would then purchase the drugs recommended by the drug seller.

The four men would continue their survey for a week, visiting up to six shops each. The shops would not be identified in the subsequent report. None of the drug sellers would know the actual purpose or identity of the buyers; nor would they be aware of their own status as anonymous, non-consenting participants in a research study.

After the week of purchasing, the products would be catalogued and a report written. If any drug seller had recommended drugs that could place customers at risk, the investigator would undertake an educational intervention with that drug seller.

We are looking forward to your guidance and appreciate your help.