USING VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION TO INCREASE ACCRUAL

Communication practices used by research coordinators and study recruiters

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Background

• Motivation for study
  – Heather MacAllister
  – ClinicalTrials.gov:
    • In 2004, ClinicalTrials.gov won the Innovations in American Government award from Harvard Kennedy School. It was cited as being "a successful model for the creation and maintenance of a system that processes and presents large amounts of specialized information to a wide range of users."

  – Basic science + social science
Most trials at Sylvester/UMH fail to accrue

Some estimates:

- There are 761 research studies/clinical trials that are active/enrolling
- There are 206 studies with complete data:
  - 11% fail to accrue even a single patient
  - Average accrual is just 38% of targeted enrollment
  - Median accrual is just 24%
  - 16% of studies have met or exceeded target enrollment
Reasons for lack of accrual

• There are many reasons for a lack of accrual
  – Patient/participant-based barriers
    • Mistrust of the medical system (& clinical research)
    • Financial, time, and other resource barriers
  – Systems-based barriers
    • Infrastructure to support participant recruitment and retention
    • Compensation for participation (physicians, participants) may be inadequate
  – Physician-based barriers
    • May not value research
    • Worry over loss of patients/revenue stream
    • May not find studies exciting or important enough
  – Trial-based barriers
    • Study may be too complex or too demanding, or inclusion criteria might be too restrictive
The role of communication

• Communication is just one small factor that impacts recruitment, but it is an obvious place to start.

• Verbal communication
  – “What” we say
  – Mostly instrumental

• Nonverbal communication
  – Includes “how” we convey information
  – Mostly relational

• Potential participants need excellent verbal AND nonverbal communication in order to be able to understand a study and to trust that they will not be harmed (or might actually benefit).
The current study

- Participants
  - 63 research coordinators and other people who recruit for clinical trials and research studies, located in Indianapolis or Miami.
  - 92% female; mean age = 38
  - 2/3 have a graduate degree
  - 53% Hispanic; 28% White/non-Hispanic; 18% Black/African American

- Procedures
  - 11 focus groups
  - Lunch/snacks +$60
  - Videotaped and audio recorded, then transcribed. All names changed.
  - Coding and analysis done with NVivo
What the findings mean

• The findings reflect the experiences and opinions of a wide range of people who recruit for clinical trials.
  – All types of job descriptions
  – All types of studies
  – All levels of recruitment abilities

• Findings may be subject to social desirability bias.
Notes on terminology

• Recruiters: Anyone who recruits for studies or clinical trials as part of their job. Some participants are professional recruiters. Others recruit because it is one part of their job (e.g. research coordinators, study nurses).

• Potential participants: People who are being approached to join a study or clinical trial. They might be patients or they might be healthy volunteers or members of the community.
Overview of findings

• As expected, recruiters say that many factors affect successful accrual to trials, including systems-based factors, patient characteristics, and the actions or decisions of PIs and physicians.

• However, recruiters believe that particular verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors can support recruitment.
How do recruiters use verbal communication to enhance recruitment?

- “Translating” information to enhance comprehension:
  - Simplification
  - Use of examples
  - Word substitutions
- Using linguistic framing or metaphors
- Encouraging potential participants to ask questions
“Translating” information: Simplification of terminology

- Recruiters often translate study information into simpler language and adopt a conversational style as a way to help potential participants comprehend important information.
  - Randi: “I pretend like I’m trying to explain it to my 5 year old. …Honestly when I started out, I would practice on my kids. I mean, you have to get it down to like a 6th [grade level]. Trying to get a consent that’s 20-30 pages long in oncology down to a 6th grade reading level is next to impossible.”
“Translating” information: Use of examples

- Not all difficult concepts can be easily translated into more basic language, so recruiters sometimes use examples instead.
  - Alli: “I think a lot of people don’t really know, when you say ‘medical legal issues,’ they don’t really know what that is, so I try to give examples … You know like, ‘has your child’s doctor talked to you about issues you might have had with housing or not having a safe place to live’ or something like that, so they know what I’m talking about.”
“Translating” information: Substituting specific words

• There is little consensus about the best word to use when describing “research” or “studies” or “randomization.” Example:
  – Citing the use of computers may make randomization seem objective and well-reasoned.
    • Doris: “I always say it goes into our ‘randomizer.’ You know, a ‘randomizer’ like some sort of gobbledy gook box.”
  – OR the use of a computer may seem cold and unfeeling:
    • Cristina: “In many cities you have to treat them like people, you say ‘computer,’ that’s too cold. They want to feel like somebody, like a PI or physician, is involved in their health and you are helping them. You say ‘computer’, it’s too cold.”
Linguistic framing/metaphors

- Recruiters report discussing studies in terms that might be more familiar to potential participants.
  - Genevieve: “… saying things like, ‘This drug has been approved by the FDA’ and things like that, like it’s already used for this [other] purpose. So it’s like less scary that they’re taking new drugs, like this is not experimental; this drug is safe. Or, like [if] there’s a blood draw. ‘This is the same amount of blood they would take if you were getting a blood draw at the doctor’s office.’ It just kind of [explaining] things [in terms of what] they’re familiar with already… Just kind of making it less scary because it’s kind of like, you’ve already experienced this before; it’s ok.
  - Other examples: IRB is like the “research police” that enforces rules for research; ICF is not a contract, but proof that information was provided.
Encouraging questions

• Inviting potential participants to ask lots of questions, which fosters better understanding of all risks/benefits of a study and helps them feel more comfortable with joining. It also signals to participants that recruiters are not trying to conceal anything.
  
  – Lillian: “[With] suspicious patients… I emphasize contact numbers for questions, and you can contact them anytime. And say it’s totally voluntary, and just how free they are, and just show them the consent where those words are to prove that I’m telling you this and it’s here, so there are all kinds of escape routes, if they want it, if they need it.”
How do recruiters use **nonverbal** communication to enhance recruitment?

• “Reading” potential participants’ nonverbal cues in order to adapt own communication

• Mirroring potential participants’ nonverbal communication behaviors

• Specific nonverbal communication behaviors:
  – Eye contact
  – Body orientation
  – Touch
  – Tone of voice
  – Smiling/expressions of friendliness
  – Appearance cues that promote perceptions of credibility
“Reading” people

- Recruiters say that it is important to be able to accurately assess a potential participant’s state of mind in order to determine the timing of their approach and the amount and type of information to present.
  - Zena: …”[T]here’s a way to approach them… Someone who’s …a lot more timid, you have to …present yourself in a way where they’ll open up to you and they’ll feel comfortable with you. It depends on the person- you have to read them basically. Because based on how they react and how they look at you, you really have to pay attention to their nonverbals.”
Mirroring

• Mirroring is a form of mimicking another person’s behavior. It is a way to signal empathy, understanding, affiliation, and liking.
  
  – Lillian: “I like to mimic their tone, it’s kind of like speaking another language… You can tell what they’re feeling the moment they say something. Like, I’m bouncy all the time, and that annoys a lot of people. …[S]o the moment I walk into the room and I’m like, this isn’t one of those people, I’m just like, calm down, keep a straight face, and you just adapt… [I]f you don’t mimic it, they’re not going to respond.”
Specific nonverbal behaviors

- **Eye contact**: Used to indicate openness/honesty, assess a participant’s state of mind, and direct attention.
- **Body orientation** can communicate affiliation or domination.
- **Touch** can signal warmth and affiliation and convey a recruiter’s humanity.
  - How touch (or lack of touch) is perceived varies by culture, age, and gender, but also varies for each individual.
- **Voice**: Recruiters adapt the rate, volume, and tone of their voices to express empathy, preserve privacy, and encourage a sense of connection.
  - They can also use their voices to express approval or disapproval of a study.
- **Smiling**: Maintaining a positive attitude whenever possible (or appropriate).
- **Appearance**: The types of appearance cues that signal credibility and trustworthiness vary by type of audience. Example: lab coats
Implications: “News you can use”

• “Translating” information for potential participants helps them understand important study information and may increase consent rate.

• Developing a bond with potential participants (however fleeting) supports recruitment.

• Mirroring and adapting to potential participants’ verbal and nonverbal communication is probably a good idea (and would be supported by Communication Accommodation Theory).
Conclusions

• There is much about the clinical trial and research study recruitment context that we cannot control.
• We can, however, work to enhance our communication with potential participants.
• These study findings point toward communication strategies that may help you work more effectively toward your recruitment goals.
Next Steps

• Long term goal is to identify best practices for communication but that will take additional research, including observational research.

• We hope you will be willing to participate in future research.
THANK YOU!

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