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Health Canada's new clinical trials database should be mandatory, says expert

Health Canada has begun populating a public database with limited information about the drug trials it has approved, but the federal regulator is not yet prepared to introduce a law requiring sponsors or researchers to register their trials. A leading industry critic says the problem is that a voluntary registry won't meet researcher's need to evaluate the evidence.

Launched at the end of May, the database includes the title of each trial protocol, the medical condition involved in the trial, the drug and population being studied, the date Health Canada authorized the trial, and the study's enrolment status. Although Health Canada has more information about trials, including sites where patients are being enrolled, it has chosen to include only limited information in this database.

Dr. Pat Stewart, interim senior executive director at Health Canada's Therapeutic Products Directorate, says the database "was meant to be something we could do in an efficient manner that would give enough high-level information, that if a patient was interested in finding out more, they could contact the sponsor and get more information."

The new database contains much less content than international clinical trial registries. Those registries also list study sites, investigators and their contact information, details of trial designs, primary and secondary outcome measures, and in some cases, trial results. That more comprehensive information allows academics assessing the risk and benefits of drugs to analyze all new drug studies, not just those that have been published.

But these trial registries rely on sponsors or researchers to list their studies — and not all of them do so. Health Canada is posting information it already has, Stewart points out, rather than relying on sponsors to list their trials.

The agency conducted a public consultation about the database in late 2012 and early 2013, during which the pharmaceutical industry raised concerns about the amount of information in the database, citing proprietary issues.

Health Canada will update the database nightly with available information on all drug studies approved from Apr. 1 on, except for those conducted on healthy volunteers (typically individuals who are paid to participate in phase 1 studies).

The government approves about 800 drug trials annually. Trials of medical devices and natural health products will not be included in the new database.

Health Canada hopes the database will fill the information gap regarding clinical trials in Canada. In 2011–2012, when Health Canada surveyed two of the major international trial registries (clinicaltrials.gov, based in the United States, and controlled-trials.com, based in Europe) it found that only about half the trials Health Canada approved had been registered.

This registration gap occurs despite the policy of major medical journals, who only publish the study results from trials that are registered. Since 2010, the Tri-Council

Policy Statement, Canada's dominant ethical guideline concerning research on humans, has also required registration of all trials conducted in Canada.

"We have no authority to compel them to [register], and this is one of the reasons why we took steps to develop a clinical trials database," says Stewart.

Matthew Herder, an assistant professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia who specializes in the commercialization of science, views the new database as "a very preliminary baby step."

His concern is that the database does not require sponsors or researchers to register trials. Trial registration is a legal requirement in the US and other jurisdictions, where failing to register a trial results in fines. Herder would like to see Canada adopt the same model. Unless registries are mandatory, Herder says, researchers will be unable to evaluate the integrity of the evidence about any given drug.

As part of its efforts to modernize, Health Canada is looking at "the idea of potentially compelling sponsors to register their clinical trials in a site like the World Health Organization," says Stewart. But the department has not yet tabled any legislation.

Given widely reported scandals involving selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors and other drugs, where conclusions published in medical journals were later discovered to differ substantially from unpublished data, Herder believes it is past time for Health Canada to act.

"There have been major controversies about the evidence base behind medications which are approved, so I'm troubled that there hasn't been more headway made," he says.

He's not alone. In a report published last November, the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology recommended Health Canada require trial registration "to the greatest degree permitted under its existing legislative and regulatory Authorities."

The pharmaceutical industry opposed registration requirements, according to the report, claiming they would duplicate the US and EU regulations.

Stewart believes the new database will help Canadians who are interested in finding experimental treatments.

The new database may also prompt more discussion of mandatory trial registration. But in other countries, the focus has shifted from registering trials, now seen as routine, to accessing trial results. In 2007, the US began requiring summary results of trials be reported within one year of completing data collection. This year, the *British Medical Journal* (*BMJ*) published information on its website about the problem of "hidden clinical trial data." Author Ben Goldacre and others have also contributed to an online petition calling on governments, regulators and research organizations to ensure that all trials are registered and "the full methods and the results reported." —Miriam Shuchman, Toronto, Ont.

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