I21 Current Status of Clinical Research in Correctional Settings – A Review

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By attending this presentation, attendees will understand some basic principles of clinical research in correctional settings. The presenters will elaborate on the encumbrances involved in the informed consent process and the obstacles encountered in conducting research in such settings. This presentation will also describe some potential advantages and gains to the subjects and society in general.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by pointing out the ramifications and implications of conducting biomedical and psychological research on inmates. The research community will benefit by gaining ample understanding of variations in research procedures, current trends and thinking in conducting research, and IRB governance for this population that is considered to be vulnerable. Incarcerated individuals have a very high incidence of drug abuse, alcoholism, HIV, hepatitis, and mental illness. By conducting research in this population, we hope to learn more about new diagnostic and treatment modalities.

Research in correctional settings has always been considered controversial. On one hand, this is a set of individuals who have lost their liberty and, therefore, are deemed unable to give informed consent; on the other hand, there is a wealth of potential clinical information that could be discovered if research is done appropriately. Inmates in correctional settings can be surprisingly agreeable and amenable to clinical research, for a variety of reasons. Additionally, there are several diseases (such as Hepatitis C, HIV) and conditions (such as alcoholism and substance abuse) that are overrepresented in this population; extensive research on this population is indeed sorely needed.

In general, clinical research requires voluntary informed consent. Dealing with inmates in a correctional setting brings up several ethical and legal dilemmas. Because we are dealing with individuals who have lost their freedom, some have commented that any consent offered for clinical and experimental research is inherently coerced and involuntary.

While there are many potential rewards for conducting research in a correctional setting, one cannot underestimate the importance of having extensive and special safeguards in place to achieve the potential benefits. For example, a specialized IRB, which understands and is sensitive to protecting the rights of the incarcerated population, is extremely important. The IRB should consist of experienced personnel who are able to evaluate the protocols and, at the same time, assure that protections for patient rights and safety are present. The formation of such a committee is vital to eliminate any form of coercion during the informed consent process.

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