23.1: Planning communications

It is important to communicate the progress of a trial, from its initiation to its end, to all the people and institutions (the stakeholders) likely to have an interest in the trial and its results. Planning this communication should start before the proposal for the trial is submitted for clearance and funding, and the communication plan should be reviewed and updated periodically throughout the trial.

Many researchers do not give communication and dissemination sufficient attention. This can lead to resistance to its initiation, because community members or local or national officials feel annoyed that they have not been consulted or kept informed, and lack of communication may cause misunderstandings during the trial which may impede its progress. From an early stage in a trial, it is often useful to involve or to consult a person with past experience in communicating with policy makers and the general public about the conduct of a trial, ideally someone familiar with research in the context of the trial. At a minimum, in a large field trial, it is advisable to involve such an expert during the planning of the overall trial communication action plan and during the planning of the final dissemination of the findings of the trial.

A useful starting point is for the trial team to construct a list of all the potential stakeholders and to think through what information should be provided to each of them, in what format, and when. An example of extracts from the communication action plan for a trial of an adolescent sexual and reproductive health intervention in Tanzania is given in Appendix 23.3.

At a minimum, stakeholders must be told what the purpose of the trial is and what is going to happen from the start, be kept informed about the progress of the trial, and be given the results of the trial and a chance to comment on these.

There are many different communication formats and media, some, or all, of which can be used effectively at different stages in a trial. Depending on the circumstances, these may include public meetings, pamphlets, brochures, newsletters, films, press releases and briefings, web pages, academic journal articles, technical briefing documents, and policy briefing documents. While interested academics and researchers are likely to read journal articles reporting the
design and results of a trial in detail, few other stakeholders will. Conversely, policy makers will want a brief and concise report that focuses on the main findings and their implications for policy. Managers of public health programmes will want suggestions as to how the results of the trial might cause them to consider making specific modifications to their programmes, and they are also likely to want an indication of what any changes are likely to cost. So it is essential to consider what communication formats are most useful for different audiences. Communication and dissemination of trial progress and results should not all be left to the end of the trial.

Comprehensive guidance on formulating a communication plan for a clinical trial is given in Robinson et al. (2010).