

Position Statement Placebo-Controlled Research Trials

A placebo-controlled research trial involves comparing an investigational drug or procedure to an inactive substance or procedure to evaluate the former's efficacy and safety.

Current ethical standards in human subjects research ground on the principle that research subjects should not be exposed to a placebo when effective, safe treatments are already available for the health condition under study. In other words, the ethically appropriate comparator for a new investigational drug or other treatment is the currently approved treatment. According to this principle, placebo arms in research trials are appropriate only where there is equipoise, that is, genuine uncertainty about the preferred treatment for a particular health condition.

Controversy continues to exist in both the research and research ethics communities about the conditions under which placebo control is justified in an interventional study. Nevertheless, the Board continues to be guided by the provisions of the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2010 in this regard (Article 11.2).

1. The Board will not approve clinical trials involving placebo treatment when the available evidence demonstrates that a standard effective, safe, approved treatment for the condition under study exists.
2. The Board may approve clinical trials involving placebo treatment when the Investigator demonstrates that there is no standard effective, safe, approved treatment for the condition under study exists.
3. Despite (1)&(2), the Board may approve clinical trials involving placebo treatments when
 - a. there is substantial doubt about the net benefit (risks v benefit) of standard therapy;
 - b. standard therapy is not available to subjects because of cost constraints or short supply,
 - c. subjects have been shown to be refractory to standard therapy and no second-line therapy exists for them, or
 - d. subjects have refused standard therapy for a minor condition and withholding standard therapy will not expose them to undue suffering or the risk of irreversible harm.

In all cases, the onus is on the investigator to demonstrate to the Board that one or more of the above conditions justifying use of a placebo are met in the proposed study.

Nothing precludes the use of placebo in testing add-on treatments to standard therapy when all subjects receive all treatments that would ordinarily constitute standard care.