Data provenance and integrity of health-care systems data for clinical trials

The need to run clinical trials quickly and efficiently is well recognised, none more so than during the push to find life-saving treatments and preventative measures for COVID-19. Late phase clinical trials can take many years and are expensive, due to the immense efforts necessary to deliver them. There are various ways in which the conduct of clinical trials could be improved, one is through judicious use of data already collected in health-care interactions. These data might be known as health-care systems data, routinely collected health-care data (RCHD), or real-world data. We describe here how one key roadblock to the use of these data can be removed.

In the UK, 50% of the National Institute for Health and Care Research-funded trials (to 2019) were planning to access and use RCHD. However, looking at the data given to trials from registries between 2013 and 2018, fewer than 5% of UK-based randomised clinical trials obtained RCHD. As notable examples, the RECOVERY and PRINCIPLE trials of potential treatments for COVID-19 have each successfully harnessed benefits of RCHD, which has simplified multi-site data collection through centralised collation and aided identification of potential trial participants. There is an intention by trialists more widely to make use of RCHD for study design and recruitment through to outcome ascertainment and post-trial follow-up; successful high-profile example trials will encourage further uptake.

Regulatory issues are a major challenge to wider use of RCHD in trials. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency in the UK and the US Food and Drug Administration recognise the potential value of RCHD. As notable examples, the RECOVERY and PRINCIPLE trials of potential treatments for COVID-19 have each successfully harnessed benefits of RCHD, which has simplified multi-site data collection through centralised collation and aided identification of potential trial participants. There is an intention by trialists more widely to make use of RCHD for study design and recruitment through to outcome ascertainment and post-trial follow-up; successful high-profile example trials will encourage further uptake.

By investigating the data lifecycles of HES APC and CRD, we have demonstrated that their curation is robust, and handled with appropriate controls and automation. We are confident that the data can be considered as equivalent to high-quality transcribed versions of the original source data, and so are sufficiently reliable for use in clinical trials.

Our detailed approach has clear implications for the design, conduct, and analysis of clinical trials. We have demonstrated that these two key health-care systems datasets have the provenance and data integrity for use in clinical trials that would be suitable in regulatory submissions. This approach is relevant to industry as well as academia. Greater use of RCHD should change
many aspects of trial conduct, including the way trials are monitored and in particular, probably decreasing their carbon footprint.

Our work on two health-care systems datasets is only the initial step. The integrity and provenance of each routinely collected dataset that might be used in clinical trials should now be systematically assessed and clearly documented using the same approach. We call upon, and strongly encourage, all data collators to share and maintain the necessary documentation in a similar manner that we have started for HES APC and CRD.

Trialists must also record the relevance of RCHD (validity and suitability) in their trial protocol and Trial Master File, and we suggest a process of curation and documentation of these choices. Further work is important to assess the use of RCHD against traditional trial-specific data collection methods so trialists can choose which approach to use for data items, accounting for availability, completeness, timeliness, latency, and cost. Such assessments can be achieved through studies-within-a-trial in existing trials.

In conclusion, RCHD has the potential to transform the conduct of clinical trials, but their sponsors need confirmation of their integrity and provenance to satisfy regulatory-grade standards. We have demonstrated the process for two important datasets and now urge data providers to take the necessary steps to facilitate this for all relevant datasets. These steps will make trials more efficient and consequently lead to faster improvements in health care for all.

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