Use of Deception in Research with Human Participants

Deception in research will involve deliberately withholding information about the purpose of the research and/or the study procedures, or providing false information about some aspect of the research, or a combination of both. This guidance summarizes the requirements for conducting ethical research that involves deception and considerations for IRB approval.

When is Deception Permissible?

• The validity of the research requires deception and/or there is scientific justification
• Non-deceptive alternatives are not available
• The use of deception poses no more than minimal risk to research participants
• Knowledge of the true or withheld information would not be significant to whether or not a participant chooses to participate (i.e., participants are not deceived into participating in research that they would not have otherwise)

Consent Requirements

Research that involves deception does not allow for complete informed consent and therefore must qualify for a waiver or alteration of the required elements of informed consent per 45 CFR 46.116(d). All of the following must be true:

1. The research involves no more than minimal risk to the participants;
2. The waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the participants;
3. The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration; and
4. Whenever appropriate, the participants will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation.

Requirements for Debriefing

• A clear explanation about why deception was necessary
• The accurate description of the research purpose and/or study procedures; as applicable
• An opportunity for participants to ask questions
• Request a waiver for debriefing when either consent or debriefing would be unattainable, or if debriefing would cause more harm than the deception

Additional IRB Considerations

• Research involving deception does not qualify for review as exempt research
• Mild deception may be reviewed as expedited if the research is no more than minimal risk to research participants