

To see whether a proposed trial might be feasible and acceptable, exploratory work involving groups of patients can be useful. This may highlight shortcomings in the design plans; or help to define outcomes that are more relevant; or even suggest that the concept is a non-starter.^{5, 6}

This can save a lot of time, money, and frustration. The clinical trial in men with localized prostate cancer that we described in Chapter 11 (p140-141) showed how the research design was improved by careful consideration of the terms used by clinicians to describe the trial's purpose and the treatment options. Exploration of patients' views led to an acceptable study because the concerns and information needs of the men being invited to participate had been identified, and the information provided to potential participants took account of these findings.⁷

3. Publish all the results and make them accessible

Selective reporting of the results of research can lead to serious biases. Some 'negative' studies are never published when the results do not match the expectations of the investigators or funders. Without a published report to tell the tale, these trials disappear without trace.⁸ Furthermore, results within published trials may be selectively reported – that is, some of the results are excluded because they are not so 'positive' for the treatment being tested.⁹ Patients have suffered and died because of biased reporting of research on the effects of treatments. This practice is unethical as well as unscientific.

4. Even when studies are published, they often omit important elements that enable readers to assess and apply the findings. One review of 519 randomized trials published in reputable journals during December 2000 found that 82% did not describe the process of allocation concealment and 52% did not provide details of measures to reduce observer biases – both features that we suggested in Chapter 6 were crucial to good studies.¹⁰ This poor reporting of details extends even to the description of the treatments used. A trial showing that giving a specific booklet (compared with no booklet) helped patients with irritable bowel