Defining & Drafting a Protocol

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What is a Protocol?

A protocol is a master document authored, reviewed, and agreed to by multiple stakeholders that outlines how your study should be conducted safely and effectively.

Thus, the protocol needs to be **explicitly followed.** If the protocol is not followed correctly, you take a risk of committing research misconduct.

The protocol is a living document that will evolve throughout the various stages of the study. Amendments and revisions must be approved by the IRB prior to implementations to ensure ethics and subject safety.

Protocol Deviations

Any aspect of the protocol not followed is called a protocol deviation. All protocol deviations need to be documented.

Documentations are important because protocol deviations can impact the safety of a participant; they can impact the integrity and accuracy of the data; and they may need to be reported to the IRB.

Always follow the protocol & thoroughly document any protocol deviations.

Sections of a Protocol

- General Information
- Background Information
- Trial Objectives & Purpose
- Trial Design
- Selection & Withdrawal of Participants
- Treatment of Participants
- Assessment of Efficacy
- Assessment of Safety
- Statistics
- Direct Access to Source Data & Documents
- Quality Control and Assurance
- Ethics
- Data Handling & Record keeping
- Supplements

General Information

- Title
- ID Numbers (IRB, Clinical Trials.gov)
- Sponsor & Monitor Information
- Contact Information of PI and Staff
- Lab/Pharmacy Information
- Site Logistics

Background Information

- Name and description of investigational product
- Summary of findings from non-clinical studies
- Known & Potential Risks and Benefits
- Note that study will be conducted in compliance with the protocol and any regulatory body

Trial Objectives & Purpose

- A detailed description of the goals of the trial, potential clinical significance
- Why are participants potentially being exposed to risk?

Trial Design

- Primary & Secondary Endpoints ("What are you measuring?")
- Type of Trial (Double-Blind, Placebo Controlled, Parallel, Cohorts)
- Instructions to minimize bias
- Trial Treatment/Dosage
- What is expected of the subject

Selection & Withdrawal of Participants

- Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
- What happens when a participant wants to withdrawal
- Type of data being collected

Treatment of Participants

- Product information & dosage
- Route & Dosing Schedule
- Considerations for different arms / cohorts
- Other medications or treatments permitted while participants are enrolled

Assessment of Efficacy

- Efficacy = Effectiveness + Safety
- How will you measure/ determine this?
- Will the benefits outweigh the risks?

Assessment of Safety

- Specifying Safety parameters
- Methods of timing, recording & analyzing safety
- Will there be a Data Safety Monitoring Board (DSMB)?
- Follow up after an AE/SAE?

Statistics

- What statistical methods will be employed?
- Timing of interim analysis?
- Enrollment breakdown (What will determine statistical significance? Sub-groupings by demographic or site location?)

Direct Access to Source Data & Documents

- Who will have access to the data?
- Monitoring?
- 3rd Party Access?
- Data Security?

Quality Control & Assurance

- Usually policies set by the sponsor
- Monitoring (Remote/On-Site)?
- Adverse Event Reporting?

Ethics

- Protections for special populations?
- Acknowledgement of Declaration of Helsinki
- Risk/Benefit consideration for special cases

Data Handling & Record Keeping

- Data ownership?
- How long will this be retained?
- Who has access?

Supplements

- FDA Label (Phase IV post-approval studies)
- Relevant background research
- Specifications for surgical or storage equipment
- Supplementary protocols (imaging reviews, pathology reports, etc.)

NOTE: Similar information may be discussed in multiple sections (e.g. Data Access impacts Quality Assurance, Statistics and multiple other sections of the protocol).