Studies within a trial (SWAT): Improving the evidence base for trial recruitment and retention

Pascoe, EM[1], Braat, S[2] on behalf of the Australian Clinical Trials Alliance (ACTA) Innovative Trial Design and Conduct Reference Group.

[1] *University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia*
[2] *University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia*

Background
Randomised trials are central to evidence-based healthcare systems. Processes fundamental to the success of a trial are recruiting the targeted number of participants and retaining them in the trial at least until the primary outcome is measured. While it is universally agreed that poor recruitment and retention are wasteful and can compromise study validity, little is known about efficient and effective recruitment and retention strategies. Studies within a trial (SWAT), methodological research embedded within one or more trials, are being promoted as the state-of-the-art for research in recruitment and retention.

Objectives
To review the evidence base for efficient and effective trial recruitment and retention strategies and describe the SWAT scene in the United Kingdom (UK).

Method
Review of published literature on recruitment and retention and search of websites promoting trial methodology research.

Results
At least half of publically-funded trials fail to recruit their original target sample size and half lose more than 10% of their participants before the primary outcome is measured. The evidence base for strategies to enhance recruitment and retention is sparse, often not relevant to trials requiring specific study visits, and tends to be observational. The SWAT programme in the UK is a systematic approach to improving the evidence-base for efficient and effective recruitment and retention and other trial conduct methods.

Conclusions
There is a need to prioritise methodology research in recruitment and retention and to generate a quality evidence-base for efficient and effective trial conduct strategies. Australian clinical trials would benefit from a SWAT programme.