Bioethical Aspects of Early Phase Trials in Humans

Dr. Avshalom M. Adam ©

The MBA Program, College of Management, Israel

VManagement, CEO. www.vmanagement.co.il

avshalomadam@gmail.com

To what extent are early phase trials of new drugs in humans ethical? Does the received ethical compass, the Declaration of Helsinki, suffice? In Phase One trials safety is tested by investigating toxicity and side effects on healthy human subjects who receive increasing doses of a drug while they are closely monitored.[1] If the first statement of Article 17 of the Declaration of Helsinki, "[P]hysicians should abstain from engaging in research projects involving human subjects unless they are confident that the risks involved have been adequately assessed and can be satisfactorily managed]", is taken literally, Phase One is a non-starter, since the risk is yet unknown and cannot be adequately assessed. The objective of Phase One is to find whether or not a drug is safe by increasing the dose and assessing the risks involved with high levels of poisoning. If we take Article 18 of the Declaration of Helsinki on its face value, the situation proves to be even worse: "Medical research involving human subjects should only be conducted if the importance of the objective outweighs the inherent risks and burdens to the subject. This is especially important when the human subjects are healthy volunteers." In phase one the inherent risks and burdens to healthy human subjects are yet to be known. The importance of the objectives is subject to subjective calculations. Whether this subjective calculation would meet the desired outcome of the calculation can only be measured in Phase Two and Phase Three trials, whereas most promised drugs do not survive the clinical trials. Thus the extent to which early phase trials in humans are ethical is discussed in view of the apparent inconsistency between the aims of Phase One trials and the Declaration of Helsinki.

[1] http://www.fda.gov/cder/handbook/Phase1.htm