IBTN Conference 2022 Abstract Submission

Title: Identifying the active ingredients of interventions to improve participant retention: A behavioural science analysis of a Cochrane review

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Background: Patient retention to clinical trials is a top priority for trial methodology research. Retention can be understood as behaviours that trial participants are asked to carry out (e.g., returning questionnaires). Behavioural science can be used to explore retention through the application of tools to specify retention behaviours and to describe interventions to improve retention using shared terminology.

Objective: To analyse interventions that aimed to improve participant retention through a behavioural science lens, and to describe the target behaviours and active ingredients of interventions.

Methods: An existing Cochrane review identified eight categories of retention intervention (e.g., monetary incentives) that should be prioritised for future research. The 24 studies reporting these retention interventions were selected for analysis. Published papers, and study materials requested from primary study authors, were double coded for Behaviour Change Techniques (BCTs).

Results: Across studies, target retention behaviours were not clearly defined and none of the studies included in our analysis used BCT labels to describe intervention content. Retention interventions within the same categories in the Cochrane review implicitly included different BCTs. Fewer BCTs were identified in published papers than in study materials.

Conclusion: Strategies to improve retention are typically not conceptualised as behaviour change interventions. As a result, target behaviours are often not defined, and included BCTs are unclear. There may be benefits for trial design, synthesis, and replication if target behaviours are clearly stated and BCTs are explicitly used to describe strategies to improve retention.