

Monitoring clinical research in Africa – a life-enriching experience, despite many challenges

Monitoring clinical research studies in Africa is not for the faint hearted and the challenges are considerable. However, so are the rewards. Yolanda Lewis and Lucia Smith, both veteran clinical research assistants (CRAs) with the African Clinical Research Organisation (ACRO), have experienced these highs and lows first-hand in a variety of African countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Gambia.

According to Lucia and Yolanda, getting to the remote locales is a challenge in its own right – entailing long-haul flights with frequent delays and multiple connections, often on planes that need serious overhauling. Road travel is equally fraught, and many research sites are hard to reach, even in a 4X4.

However, once at the trial location, the work usually proceeds well. "The quality of the clinical research projects is generally extremely high. This is mainly due to the willingness and dedication of site study staff who are highly committed to learn as much as possible and determined to never make the same mistake twice," Yolanda continues.

"The research infrastructure is fairly good and patients are not hesitant to visit the site and participate in trials, especially when a meal is provided as an 'incentive'. It's important to remain culturally sensitive at all times. For example, a woman might encourage her son to divorce his wife if the latter participates in a clinical trial without obtaining her husband's permission."

"As a result, it's crucial to involve community leaders and inform them of what the trial will entail," says Lucia. "As more and more trials are undertaken throughout Africa, this process is becoming easier." She also feels that CRAs should do their best to fit in with local customs. "Of course we stand out, despite our best efforts – but it's important to be accepted as part of the team."

Both Yolanda and Lucia regard their work in Africa more rewarding than undertaking clinical trials in developed world situations. "For the local people we work with, research is much more than just an intellectual exercise.

Becoming involved in a research study is viewed as an opportunity to improve the health of the community as a whole, and their commitment to achieving this goal is commendable. Personally, addressing life-threatening, infectious diseases in Africa is far more satisfying than monitoring studies of lifestyle diseases in a developed world setting.”

The need for pharmaceutical companies to sensitise CRAs on what to expect is of extreme importance, and both Yolanda and Lucia are concerned that insufficient measures are taken in this regard. “It’s a major culture shock,” says Lucia, “and many CRAs are insufficiently prepared for this, expecting an idyllic and exotic getaway. It’s anything but – it’s hard work. However, it’s important work and you need to be emotionally strong to undertake it successfully.”

Particularly rewarding for Yolanda is seeing the improvement in the health and survival rates of children who participated in various studies, along with the empowerment of women. “Participation in HIV mother-to-child transmission studies made a difference in this regard. It was also extremely satisfying to see women empowering themselves by taking a stand against their husbands and mothers-in-law when it came to signing up their children as clinical trial participants.”

Asked what she would like to be remembered for in respect of her contribution to ACRO in Africa, Yolanda concludes, “I feel privileged to play an integral part in ensuring that safe and affordable medicines are made available to ordinary citizens of Africa.”

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Pull out comments:

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