Ethical Issues – Behavioral Economics and Combination Prevention

Alex John London, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Ethics and Policy
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Carnegie Mellon University
Agenda

- A few key points about ethics and research on incentives for health promotion.
- Based on work in progress:
  - “Research Involving Financial Incentives For Health: Clarifying the Ethical Issues” Alex John London Ph.D., David A. Borasky Jr., MPH, Anant Bhan M.B.B.S., MHSc.
  - Thanks to my co-authors.
Descriptive Categories

- Payments in research as compensation:
  - for time & expense
- Incentives for research participation:
  - Payments or gifts for compliance with a research protocol.
  - Facilitate development of generalizable knowledge.
- Incentives for Health
  - Payments or gifts for compliance with a clinical or public health regimen.
  - Facilitate attaining an individual or public health benefit.
- Research on Incentives for health.
Need for Guidance

- Ethical issues involving research on incentives for health not explicitly addressed in current regulatory frameworks.
- There can be important normative differences between incentives for research participation and incentives for health promotion.
“Undue Inducement” (I)

- Concern: particularly attractive incentives might undermine the integrity of the recipient’s deliberative process.
  - Myopia or deliberative distraction: people might consent without duly considering relevant information.
  - Consent would not reflect the application of the individual’s values to relevant facts.
Two Clarifications

- Whether incentives have this affect is an empirical question.

- Moral force limited to cases where the agent:
  - has not already considered the merits of the options
  - options might pose significant risks or the agent might be averse to one of more of them.
Relevance to Incentives for Health

- Some payments are designed to overcome motivational inertia / biases of recipients already committed to goals they have difficulty achieving.
  - Smoking cessation, weight reduction, drug and alcohol rehabilitation.
- Such payments support, rather than undermine, recipient autonomy.
  - Concern that incentives are so attractive that recipients “won’t be able to refuse” is out of place.
“Undue Inducement” (II)

Concern: the legitimacy of interfering with a choice.
- Problem with “your money or your life!” is not lack of comprehension or failure to apply one’s values.
- Thief has no right to impose the choice.

The offer would have to induce recipients to:
- Act against their own interests or
- Act in a way they ought not
  - Unreasonably high risks
  - Demeaning, degrading, exploitative
Relevance to Incentives for Health

- Does not arise in cases where recipients already want to achieve the incentivized health goal.
- May arise when agents are conflicted about competing goals or are averse to an activity:
  - But many incentives for health provide recipients with a direct health benefit.
- When recipients are conflicted or averse and benefits accrue primarily to others, central issues are:
  - Justification for the risks to participants
  - Concerns of justice or fairness.
Justifying Influence and Risk

- Is there a compelling justification for using incentives?
  - Anticipated direct benefits to recipients (if any) or
  - Anticipated public health benefits of the intervention
  - Merits or necessity of this means of influence.

- Are risks of incentives for health reasonable in light of these factors?

- Does the research itself increase risks?

- Have risks been minimized to the extent feasible, consistent with the integrity of the intervention / research?
Risks of Incentives for Health

- Confidentiality
  - Signaling health status to others.
- Safety
  - Making recipients targets for robbery / reprisal.
- Crowding out of intrinsic motivation
  - Payments can sometimes inhibit behavior.
- Changing social norms
  - Expectation of payment for other health services?
- Strategic behavior & gaming the system
Incentives for health should be responsive to the health needs of the host community.

- Represent a judicious use of scarce resources.
  - Target a significant health need
  - Compelling justification for using incentives
- Be sustainable in the host community.
  - Removing an incentive can inhibit the incentivized activity
  - What is the plan for terminating the research or transitioning to implementation?
- Be sensitive to social inequalities
  - Payments can empower and reduce social burdens.
  - Can also exacerbate inequalities.
References