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Monetary and Other Incentives in the Research Context: Definitions and IRB Guidance

“Compensation” means actual payment for someone’s time and effort – usually associated with a job. It suggests putting a market value on that time and effort, so is potentially comparable to a local wage scale. “Compensation” in the U.S. is taxable as income. The IRB does not view money given to study participants to be “compensation” because there is no way to put a value on each individual’s contribution of time to the study.

“Reimbursement” means repayment of costs incurred by the participant in order to participate in the study. These costs include those required to participate in a study and are not “income.” Investigators should explain to participants if the study will cover travel, parking, or other expenses.

“Payment” or “remuneration” given to subjects in a research study generally refers to the incentive offered in appreciation of the participant’s contribution to the project. It is not measured by the actual value of each person’s time; it is consistent across all participants. This amount must be reasonable in the context of the proposed study procedures. The IRB’s job is to permit the PI to offer an incentive up to an amount large enough to attract participants, but not so large as to constitute undue inducement – that is, to lead prospective participants to undertake risk they would not otherwise undertake. The “payment or remuneration” may be monetary or in the form of a gift. In low-resource settings outside the U.S., payment may be monetary, and also may take the form of food, soap, or other household items.

“Bonus” payments to study staff for recruiting: the IRB prohibits extra payments for recruiting members of a cohort for a clinical trial because it incentivizes the recruiters to exercise greater efforts to get those people in. They might overlook a few eligibility criteria or take advantage of the “therapeutic misconception” or use other power disparities to get people to agree to join the study. “Per participant” costs are common, because they address the overhead associated with the study procedures conducted for each participant.