The ethical case for allowing medical trials that deliberately infect humans with COVID-19

Despite the desperate need for a COVID-19 vaccine, ethical concerns may delay the development of an effective vaccine.

Authors in The Conversation are not to endorse an ethically controversial procedure called “human challenge trials.” These trials test medical interventions with the aim to deliberately infect volunteers; but they also carry the chance of significant risks for volunteers.

The ethical case for allowing medical trials deliberatly to infect humans with the coronavirus – which triggers the COVID-19 infection – but that would minimally expedite the development of a vaccine.

The debate over human challenge trials has been raging for nearly a century among medical professionals and academics. But only recently, within the last two months of the pandemic, have three factors finally energized a bid to speed up the vaccine-development process.

Siting and scaling

A century has passed since Alexander Fleming, before it could be called antiseptic. After establishing a reliable method to reduce invasions and remove invaders, doctors and nurses set out to find the best way to clean wounds. They eventually found that chloroform was less effective for three reasons: it was not sterile, it was too expensive, and it was toxic to tissues.

There are key practical points with which to consider: efficacy. Could the international medical community rearrange time frames of enormous proportions and save millions of lives? The frequency of infections then compared to a non-vaccinated control group.

In the second medical human challenge trials, a much smaller group of volunteers is intentionally infected after receiving the experimental measures as a vaccine.

To date, more than 1,000 volunteers from 14 companies have volunteered to be part of such a procedure. That there is no ethical dilemma for human challenge trials because volunteers are deliberately infected with the coronavirus – if volunteers are infected with COVID-19, the vaccine will be most effective.

For many, human challenge trials are not only unethical, but a risky and wasteful project. And while COVID-19 vaccines might be more relevant than ever, volunteers must also include people who are high-risk for severe COVID-19, the opposite is true for human challenge trials.

Delaying a vaccine may also endanger volunteering health care workers. Current volunteers put the number of U.S. health care workers’ deaths from COVID-19 to nearly 1 million.

Moreover, few countries refrain from risking the health and lives of their young fighters, for example, also face unknown dangers. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments are forced to vaccinate many more volunteers.

Malicious medical trials that deliberately infect humans with COVID-19 should be not only prohibited but voluntarily halted. Involving humans in medical trials without their consent is highly unethical – it includes the experiments performed by the Nazis on hundreds of inmates of a concentration camp in Auschwitz.

Background

The argument that willing adults cannot consent to risking their health for the benefit of others is highly flawed. The medical ethics of responsible and informed consent are based on a principle: the human subject should have the right to decide whether to participate.

The cardinal principle of doing no harm to the individual patient or the volunteer.

In April, some American lawmakers did weigh in on human challenge trials. But there is no evidence that the opposition to human challenge trials derives from justifiable concern.

Opposition to human challenge trials for COVID-19 is based, first and foremost, on the noblest human values. The COVID-19 epidemic is a global disaster, and decisions concerning it should be made with the wider perspectives of public health and general morality. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments are forced to vaccinate many more volunteers.

Despite the urgent need to beat COVID-19, health authorities in the U.S. began to consider the human challenge trials.

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