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## Commentary

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# Encouraging Volunteer Participation in Health Research: The Role of Nonprofit Organizations

## Abstract

Health research mainly relies on volunteers to generate data. Volunteer participants not only help provide necessary information to solve problems but also contribute to free participation which in turn helps the research wheel to continue. People mainly contribute to different nonprofit organizations by giving money for charity. Nevertheless, volunteering in health research (for example, as participants and data collectors) is considered a way of supporting these organizations. This article discusses the projected role of nonprofit organizations in encouraging people's voluntary participation in different types of research. Leaders of nonprofit organizations are encouraged to spend some of their budgets to increase people's awareness on research through different means including media advertisements. Research on this matter should also be encouraged to inform future practice.

**Keywords:** Volunteering; Health research; Nonprofit organization.

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## Introduction

For over a century now the scientific method has been the basis for research in social and health sciences [1]. It is known that this approach requires human participants, data collectors, and observers to reach the essential data for solving specific problems. Therefore, the required human participants play a role in determining the amount of funding required to finish a study.

In general, sources of research funding include governments, private entities, and industry support. Private entities, or third sector organizations, include foundations, public charities, research organizations and volunteer organizations [2], referred to later as “organizations”. According to Porter and Kramer [3], the number of volunteer organizations in the USA is increasing which might help address the society’s high expectations including a higher contribution to research. This article discusses the

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role of nonprofit organizations in promoting research by encouraging volunteer participation.

## **Volunteer Work**

Volunteering is the essence of the scholarly work of many academics around the world [4]. Volunteer activity is work performed for no payment in return [5], by which volunteers give their time freely for the benefit of others [6]. Basically, health research with human subjects relies on volunteer participants to generate data. This includes their participation as subjects of a study, volunteer data collectors, or even volunteer researchers.

A human's desire to help others is affected by many factors [1] and different motives stand behind people's engagement in volunteer activities [7]. However, voluntary associations and civic engagement declined in recent decades [8]. Americans are belonging to fewer organizations, and socializing with others less often [9], and Australians' level of participation in social and civic community life is significantly influenced by their demographic characteristics [10]. However, when asking people to participate, if reminders are sent researchers receive a spike in responses (personal experience). Similar response will take place for emotional TV advertisements and post or electronic mailings calling for help.

Many people participate in voluntary activities, including research, only if requested [5] or encouraged to do so. The use of volunteers for charity work means important cost savings when compared to the use of paid service providers [11]. Any expenses that are incurred to encourage people to participate affect research budgets. People's contribution to any research is considered a sort of charity and an important type of volunteering. Studies that involve paid participants certainly cost higher than similar studies that involve volunteer participants.

In a study that investigated public perception of volunteering across different cultures, researchers found that volunteering is strongly linked with the costs and benefits that add to the individual

from the volunteering activity [4]. In order to develop strategies to increase participation rates, researchers need to determine barriers to participation [12]. Volunteerism is also influenced by the social and cultural construction of each society, hence can be explained in part by the social determinants of people.

## **Third Sector Organizations and Research**

The third sector organizations or not-for private-profit organizations mainly depend on donations and volunteers for funding [13]. These organizations play the role of mediators between donors and the different enterprises they support. However, a small proportion of its total financial support goes to research [2], which might explain the reliance of research on volunteers to proceed. Volunteers compose a significant proportion of the human resources used in social services [11].

## **The Human Related Expenses in the Cycle of Money**

People contribute to different nonprofit organizations by giving money for charity. Their money is usually used for funding different activities, including research. Organizations seek researchers by advertising available grants with the amount they would be willing to pay for each project. Research funds help researchers pay for tools (devices, instruments, etc), materials (drugs, papers, etc), and human-related expenses. The human-related expenses include payment to subjects of a study, data collectors, observers, analysts etc. This cycle of money involves human-related expenses and supports the claim "some of the money that foundations give away belongs, in a sense, to all of us" [3].

There is a positive relationship between volunteering and human value of time [5], and humans' involvement in any research is generally divided into volunteering or paid participation. Some researchers give incentives for people to encourage them to participate. Therefore, volunteer participation in research is actually an act of charity. Generally, volunteering is an

important part of the economy and people's contribution includes volunteer time, raising funds and help institutions carry out functions [5].

Although organizations act as mediators between donors and the various enterprises they support [3], their contribution toward research should be widened beyond direct funding. Organizations need to ensure they build into their budgets the costs involved in encouraging volunteerism. Encouraging the public to voluntarily participate in research will prevent, according to some ethicists, the unethical paid participation, and help researchers easily access populations.

### **Role of Organizations in Promoting Research**

There is no doubt that community participation is important for successful health endeavors [10], such as research. However, researchers are reporting less response rates over time as voluntary participation in research is declining. The challenge for researchers in the light of these circumstances is not to carry out studies, but to include samples to withdraw valuable conclusions. To reach suitable samples, researchers are challenged to look for more funding and resources. Therefore, organizations are directing more funding to fill the gaps to create and increase the value of their support. An organization can create value when it achieves greater benefit for comparable cost or the same benefit with less spending [3] by improving the performance of fund recipients. Support can also be provided by helping researchers access samples more easily by promoting participation in research, hence increasing the quality of research results through producing evidence of the highest possible quality for practice. This can be done by promoting voluntary contributions within their community. Organizations should help advise people to the importance of their voluntary participation in research benefitting the outcomes of research and the volunteers themselves [14]. Organizations need to remember that awarding a research grant is, in fact, different from carrying out a successful research project [15].

### **Conclusion**

Organizations have an important role in encouraging people to contribute to research by promoting voluntary participation. Volunteer participants can help cut the cycle of charity money short and save money, time and effort, besides increasing the value of research outcomes. Media advertisements are utilized by different organizations to encourage people to help in their funding. The media is also used by governments and insurance companies to promote health of individuals. It is recommended that the same media be used to increase people's awareness on the importance of volunteering in research by linking this with the principle of charity- volunteering as giving. In addition, programs can be designed to inform and influence the public about the value of their voluntary contribution to science. Moreover, organizations might also encourage research in this regard to inform future organizations' practice. Encouraging people to voluntarily participate in research needs arrangement, effort, studies, and money from concerned bodies.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

No conflict of interest is associated with this work.

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