

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Helping your patients find clinical trials

In my first year of practice, a patient asked about joining a research trial. I had no idea where to begin.

To my relief, she had already done the legwork and handed me a coordinator's email. The trial was based in the United States with no Canadian site – a common obstacle. The USA runs more clinical trials, and new studies tend to open there faster. For Canadian patients, this means fewer local options and often the need to travel.

How to find trials: A two-step search

For both patients and clinicians, the hunt for a suitable trial can feel overwhelming.

Begin here:

- ClinicalTrials.gov: the most comprehensive international registry. You can filter by your patient's condition and set the country to "Canada."
- Health Canada's database: the official list of authorized drug and biologic trials within the country <https://health-products.canada.ca/ctdb-bdec/>

Is it the right trial? The five-minute scan

Before you reach out to a trial site, a quick review of the study summary can save time. Look for three essentials:

1. Status: Is it "recruiting"? Is a Canadian site listed?
2. Inclusion/exclusion criteria: Focus on age, disease stage, prior therapies and organ function.
3. Contact information: Identify the site coordinator's name and email.

If the study appears promising, the coordinator is your best point of contact.

Writing a referral email that gets a response

Trial coordinators juggle multiple studies at once. A concise, well-structured message helps your patient get an answer sooner. A recent clinic note outlining the diagnosis and treatment history often suffices.

Who's running the show?

Many industry-sponsored studies are managed by contract research organizations (CROs), the operational backbone of modern clinical trials. They oversee everything from contracts to safety reporting. If travel is necessary, CROs can often help arrange financial support for transportation or lodging.

The takeaway

I still think about that first patient. We never found an eligible trial, but the search itself proved therapeutic. It transformed a difficult conversation about prognosis into a shared project – a testament that we hadn't given up, that we were still exploring every possible path forward.

Editor's note

The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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