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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: Bias is good

If you saw “Wall Street” (1987 film) you are familiar with Gorden Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) and his speech on why greed is good.

Suppose instead that Gorden Gekko was a professor of biostatistics at a major university and starring in “The Trial”. A film about a group of shady trialists falsifying data to get their drug approved and suppose the closing scene was of Gorden Gekko giving a keynote address in a packed university hall on why bias is good.

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Bias, for the lack of a better term, is good. Without bias we would not have made it past the neanderthal stage because of our forebearers’ inability to distinguish between animals that ate them and those that didn’t.

Without concern about bias, we would not have Fisher and randomization and without the perception of fairness promoted by randomization we would not have a multibillion dollar industry of lotteries commissioned by state and local governments in the name of schools for our kids. Lotteries exist and thrive because people believe everyone has the same chance of winning -- even if infinitesimally small.

Concerns about bias fuels our economy. They have spawned growth industries of programs sold to institutions like this one to promote diversity and to train people how to recognize bias in the work place. Now maybe there will be spinoffs to teach robins and blue jays how to cohabitate.

Gambling commissions all over the country exist to ensure that the games people play in casinos are fair -- even if designed to ensure you lose.

This auditorium, no doubt, is filled with people who have been propelled up the academic ladder by publications devoted to documenting the existence of publication bias in trials. That concern has given rise to dozens of registration sites for trials so they can be registered before the start of enrollment ostensibly to prevent publication bias.

Bias means bent or tendency. We depend on those bents and tendencies. Trialists do not do trials at random. They have reasons to believe the treatments they test will work before they undertake them. If they did not they would not undertake them in the first place. That they are often wrong is no reason to throw the baby out with the wash.

We depend on those who do trials for their insights, bents, and tendencies to understand the data they generate. Those bents and tendencies drive data collection and analyses. Without them we would be looking for needles in haystacks.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is why bias is good!