WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A CLINICAL TRIAL STATISTICIAN?

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My name is James Swingler. I'm based at the Aberdeen Centre for Evaluation (ACE - previously HSRU). I've been a trial statistician (research fellow) for about 18 months.

What's your background? I did a Bcom in Economics & Statistics, an Honours degree in Statistics, and an MSc in Biostatistics. All of these were done in South Africa at Stellenbosch University & the University of Cape Town, respectively.

The Masters degree was incredibly rewarding and provided useful resources for clinical trials. Before this position, I worked part-time during my Masters for the Desmond Tutu Health Foundation back home in South Africa. This introduced me to real world health data and solidified my interest in working in the medical research sector.

What do you do in a typical week? Every week is about progressing your existing trials and thinking of new potential studies for the future. This includes being the lead author for the trial's Statistical Analysis Plan (SAP), data quality checks, final analysis when the time arrives, attending meetings to monitor and develop aspects of your trials and also reporting results to data monitoring committees or trial steering committees. As the trial statistician you really are part of the trial from inception of an idea to the dissemination of results in academic journals.

What do you like best about your job? As a trial statistician I feel that my work is making an impact in the future of healthcare research. You are constantly working towards a better future for all. I find that having the right motivation behind my work pushes me on when trials get tough, knowing that the outcome is always worth the hard graft you put in. There is also a great aspect of being the first to run the final analysis and for a period of time being the only person on the planet to know the outcome of a trial which has been likely been worked on for many years. As someone who enjoys problem solving, I've enjoyed the complexity of some trials and the requirement to better myself in order to find solutions. You are always learning and that keeps the mind young.

Any advice to share? Communication is key. Since you work in all aspects of the trial from start to finish, you need to clearly communicate with team members for the benefit of yourself, the associated team members and of course the trial itself. Good communication prevents confusion and potential conflict, which in turn leads to a better trial for all.