

# **Random assignment in practice: Lessons from experience**

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# Introduction

*“You can’t be a little bit random”*

*(Judith Gueron)*

*“Experiments are not a substitute for thinking”*

*(Burt Barnow)*

There are practical issues to consider – nothing insuperable, but cannot be neglected. Here are some examples....

# Front line staff are central

- They need to apply procedures accurately to preserve integrity of experiment
- They are the main defence against customer complaints
- So they need to understand what you are trying to do and why
- Allow time for training/briefing

# It's just a toss of a coin....

- For the purposes of explaining the process, this is a common comparison, but..
- 50:50 allocation is unlikely to happen
- You can get long runs in one direction – which can breed cynicism and/or cause operational difficulties
- There are well-developed processes for avoiding these issues

# Data collection

- Most important data – who is in which group!
- The point of assignment is a great opportunity to collect background data
- Tracking people through administrative systems is advantageous (no non-response issues; no limitations in frequency or length of follow-up; cost-effective) – so make sure you get the right informed consent
- This can be particularly important in an RCT – comparing survey respondents only introduces potential selection bias, particularly if lower response from control group

# Tails and dogs

- The integrity of the randomisation is vitally important. But so is having a meaningful treatment.
- In designing processes to guarantee internal validity, don't forget the need for external validity
- Experienced practitioners can be very creative in design.

# Conclusions

- Randomisation needs some care – there are potential pitfalls
- But it is not *that* hard – it just needs some forethought and planning
- There is plenty of help available – from the literature, from those like myself who have some experience in commissioning, and from practitioners both here and abroad