

# Converting Perspective to Practice

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As a critic, not of RCTs but only of RCT imperialism, I am delighted to be able to agree with most of what Tom Cook says in his extremely valuable paper. But I also note here a few minor caveats and a few major disagreements, which I hope will lead to a constructive dialog and a better balance of research funding.

1. My take on the cases where we have both experimental and non-experimental studies on the same topic, unlike his, is that they have often converged. But this may be a minor point, since I do not include, whereas he may include, badly designed NXTs (non-experimental) studies. I'm only interested in getting acceptable funding of 'best' alternatives to RCTs, not the mass of sloppy NXTs.
2. In view of his correct insistence (in point 4) of need for RCT expertise, it would be a long step forward if funding was not given to projects lacking full-time staff with RCT expertise. My take on the present scene is that this is far from true at the moment, which virtually guarantees the wastage of millions of dollars. It's particularly ominous that there appear to be no plans for serious immediate implementation of strong formative meta-evaluations which would advise termination of compromised RCTs. You can't uncompromise an RCT! Protagonists of RCTs are well-trained and if serious about truth rather than funding as is certainly true of Cook, should recognize these risks and take steps to minimize the costs of failures. A minimum requirement on the design of such studies would of course be good representation of the RCT critics on their controlling/review (not merely advisory) boards.
3. Since Cook agrees that cause can easily be established without RCTs (point 6) we should clearly be funding important research that matches such historic studies and observations. It seems clear that we are not doing so, and it's clear that such cases are not restricted to QXTs (quasi-experiments). It is long overdue to get a clear statement of what is acceptable, and evidence that it is governing practice, to replace the present reference which only instances regression discontinuity designs. While Cook argues for a marginal advantage of RCTs over the three (not one) alternative designs that he allows, the tough requirements on RCT applicability (see the Editorial in this issue) make these three, and (in my view) several others, competitive in many real-world situations.
4. It is clearly true, that RCTs have not been used as often as they should have been, in the last 30 years. But this is no basis for affirmative action as compensation. The use of RCTs today should be as and when, and only as and when, they are best suited and

affordable. I think that, if Tom Cook can buy that, plus the need for clarification and funding of alternatives as appropriate, and for formative meta-evaluation (that will not be an RCT design!), we can make real progress on this issue.