Bayside Health

**ALFRED HOSPITAL ETHICS COMMITTEE GUIDELINES**
**PAYMENTS TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

## Background

There is a range of ethical opinion on the payment of research participants: what participants should (or may) be paid for, and when payments cross the line into ethically unacceptable inducement.

It is important to differentiate between reimbursements for direct costs and other payments. The former are usually clearly identifiable and justifiable, such as costs incurred for travel, parking, accommodation, etc.

'Payments' are less clear-cut and can range from 'reimbursement' for time or inconvenience, acknowledgment of a person's contribution to the research, to outright incentives to participate.

The accepted ethical view has been that payment may potentially encourage participants to take unacceptable risks. This is the view taken by the National Statement, which says:

> "…payment that is disproportionate to the time involved, or any other inducement that is likely to encourage participants to take risks, is ethically unacceptable." [NS 2.2.10]

In reality, projects with an unacceptable level of risk to participants are not granted ethical approval; therefore the 'risk' argument might not be a great concern for much research.

There are other arguments for limiting the level of payments, such as preserving a culture of altruism in research participation, maintaining a reasonably level playing field for researchers so that research unable to attract much funding is not too disadvantaged, and avoiding the perception that research participation can be a form of income (this might result in people not disclosing information that would make them ineligible to participate/earn, thereby undermining the validity of the research).

In principle:

- The Ethics Committee does not make assumptions about how a participant might use their payment.
- The autonomy of people to decide whether and why to participate should be respected.

## Guidelines

The Alfred Hospital Ethics Committee offers the following guidance:

- Payments should not be, nor should they be portrayed as, a form of 'compensation' for taking risks.
- Fair reimbursement for costs incurred (travel, parking, refreshments, etc) is not only acceptable but encouraged – taking into account the study budget.
- Payments which acknowledge the participant's input – whether it be time, inconvenience, personal knowledge and experience, etc. – are acceptable.
- Tokens of thanks such as movie tickets or shopping vouchers (reasonable amounts) are acceptable.
- Prize draws, raffles, lucky dips, etc. are discouraged. It is generally preferred that all participants receive the same; a strong case would need to be made otherwise.
- The average hourly payment accepted by this Ethics Committee in recent times has been between $20-80. Payments significantly higher than this need to be justified by the researchers and assessed on a project-by-project basis by the Ethics Committee.

- Recruitment advertisements (e.g. flyers, posters, newspaper ads) may mention reimbursement, but should not include specific $ amounts.

**References:**

NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2025)

NHMRC Payment of participants in research: information for researchers, HRECs and other ethics review bodies (2019)