# Case 3: To Stop or Not to Stop a Clinical Trial

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***Were the researchers right to halt the breast cancer study early?***

The researchers were right to end the trial when looking at it through a deontological point of view. The patients are themselves an end and keeping the better drug away from the placebo group would be inhumane. Of course, they also bound themselves to telling the patients if any developments were made, as "promised subjects that they would be told if new information about their disease was discovered" (Friedman).

***Suppose by extending the trial the scientists could gain valuable knowledge that would help save many women's lives in the future. Would halting the trial early then be wrong?***

Through a utilitarian point of view, this sacrifice of the few to save the many would indeed be a morally acceptable decision, albeit at the cost of the health of many women now. The scientists did state that many patients are looking for disease-free survival, not just survival alone.

***Suppose extending the trial would save lives in the future but also result in the deaths of some women in the study. Would the extension then be permissible?***

The extension of the trial should not be permissible from a Kantian perspective, as preventable deaths being allowed would not be accepted in a study of this severity.

***Was the use of placebos ethical?***

Using a placebo in a trial is required for science to determine whether a drug actually does its intended effect. If the goal of the trial is ultimately to provide that answer in order to save as many lives as possible, then it is ethically good for a placebo to be used in a trial.

Richard Friedman, "Cases: Long-Term Questions Linger in Halted Breast Cancer Trial," New York Times, October 21, 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/pages/health.