Let’s Make a Deal

If at first you don’t succeed, trial, trial again

March 1, 1998 By Stephen Beachy

Never say never. I vowed I would never join a clinical trial of an experimental drug “just for the money,” but last month I collected $590 to participate in a Phase I drug study. Though I tried to convince myself that I was providing important information to science for the betterment of mankind, philanthropy ends for me well before the point of turning myself into a guinea pig for “the collective good.” No, this was about cash: My lover, Jonathan, had been laid off, his unemployment checks trickling to an end as we struggled to pay the rent.

I rationalized that there weren’t really many risks, though I admit that I felt a final nagging doubt when it came to signing the consent form in which I alleviated the doctors of any responsibility in the event I suffered side effects -- such as death. Just a necessary formality, I told myself. Nobody ever dies in these things ... do they?

It began with an all-day affair; I was stuck at the clinic with a tube in my arm for frequent blood draws. They had a membership at the video store next door, and though a friend had suggested that vampire movies would be appropriate, I opted for Fierce Creatures with Jamie Lee Curtis, John Cleese and Kevin Kline. The VCR headphones weren’t working, so everyone in the room was subjected to this mildly annoying comedy about a corporate takeover of a public zoo, including a man in the chair next to mine who was trying to read a fantasy novel. I’m sure Fierce Creatures distracted him from his book, but I decided that since I was there all day and hadn’t had my coffee yet -- I had to fast until four hours after my first dose -- I deserved whatever lame pleasure I could find.

I broke the fast with sushi from a nearby restaurant after perusing the armful of menus provided by a staff member. The feast didn’t stop there: They gave me more money to eat with in the afternoon, allowing me to walk the streets between blood draws, my little tube taped to my arm. I played it healthy -- salmon salad and wheatgrass juice -- trying to strengthen my system to handle whatever chemical was being tested on me.

For the next two weeks, I had to go in every morning to take my meds in full view of a staff member; this was not the most trusting study. At first, the pills gave me gas. By the end of the study, the gas had gone away, and the staff seemed like old friends -- doctors and nurses alike. I was afraid I’d suffer separation anxiety and start hanging around the clinic for no reason after the study. I wondered if they were plagued by lonely ex-research subjects addicted to the free meals

and constant scrutiny of their bodily functions.

According to my study doctor, I have a future in clinical trials. “You’re somewhat of a hot commodity in this town,” she said. “Protease inhibitor naïve, not on any meds, T-cells in that much-coveted 100 to 500 range.” She seemed to be implying that I could quit my job working with special-ed kids and sell my wares on the experimental-meds marketplace to the highest bidder. I see myself crouching in darkly lit hospital corridors, coming on to doctors and nurse practitioners ... “Hey, big boy, looking for a date? I give great stats. Check out these juicy veins.”

Just kidding -- sort of. I’ve been contacting other studies and setting up screenings, though I wonder if the staff will be so friendly, the drugs so benign, the food so good. Ah, well, they say the first time is always special. The study I’m currently considering involves four weeks on the meds and one overnight stay, but only $500. Jonathan has a job now, so “just for the money” isn’t as compelling, although with the rent taken care of I’m free to imagine more interesting uses for the money.

I still worry that being a whore for science might do some permanent damage. And what if they have no lunch budget or, worse, give me hospital food? Maybe I should negotiate more perks. I know how to tease and flirt; I know how to wheedle and withhold love. Because when it comes down to signing that little piece of paper saying you can’t sue their ass, even if you die, you begin to realize that $500 is practically nothing.

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