

Incentives in Diabetic Eye Assessment by Screening (IDEAS) trial: a three-armed randomised controlled trial of financial incentives

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Plain English summary

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One of the common complications of diabetes is diabetic retinopathy. This is caused by the formation of new, fragile blood vessels in the eye, which can bleed and cause damage, and can even lead to blindness. If retinopathy is detected early, it can be treated more effectively. Therefore, people in England with diabetes are offered annual eye screening. Eighty-one per cent of those invited attend, with lower attendance in poorer areas, and so many are at risk of preventable sight loss. Effective and affordable ways are needed to encourage more people to come to screening, in order to prevent avoidable blindness.

Financial incentives have been used to promote healthy behaviours, such as quitting smoking or having vaccinations. This research tests whether or not different types of incentives can encourage people to attend diabetic eye screening (DES).

Diabetic patients who had not attended screening for at least 2 years were included in the trial, and split into three groups randomly:

1. control – sent the usual appointment invitation letter
2. fixed group – sent the usual letter, including a voucher for £10 if they attended their appointment
3. lottery group – sent the usual letter, including a voucher promising a 1 in 100 chance of winning £1000 if they attended their appointment.

The study found that only 7.8% of control participants (5.5% from the fixed group and 3.3% from the lottery group) attended screening. Therefore, incentives, and the lottery incentive in particular, when compared with control, were not found to be effective ways to increase attendance at DES, and they may even reduce the numbers of people attending.

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