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Platform

Film festival can help equip people with tools they need to get to grips with ins and outs of biomedical research, writes **Fiona Coyle**

HOW far should doctors and scientists be allowed to go when searching for a cure for human suffering? What groups of people should be allowed to participate in biomedical research? How can we protect the vulnerable from exploitation?

With an ever-increasing need for medical advancement in a time of poor pharmaceutical innovation, biomedical research remains controversial. Previous drug scandals such as thalidomide, which raised the risk of malformation in the limbs of children, have caused public distrust in drug companies and regulators alike. Such previous tragedies have created a tension between those who believe drugs should be more heavily regulated and those who feel that over-regulation acts as a harmful barrier to innovation.

One of the many research barriers is the issue of safety. But even if we ensure the safety of medical technologies to the best of our abilities, on which groups of people can we justify testing previously untried products or methods? Many innovations are aimed at vulnerable groups such as the disabled and elderly. How can we ensure the efficacy of new treatments without exploiting such vulnerable groups?

In the 1978 film *Coma*, patients in persistent vegetative states are used for biomedical research without their consent. Could we justify this if we thought that a drug would save thousands of lives?

The most prominent barrier to medical innovation is the length of time taken between the first clinical trials and the technology being approved for sale. We hear of new breakthroughs in cancer drugs, stem cell therapies and anti-dementia medications on a daily basis. Yet we see no evidence of these advancements until ten years down the line due to the need for clinical trials and regulatory approval. New market models for early access to drugs are being developed to help promote innovation though these measures can put patients in danger as the safety of these new medical technologies cannot be ensured.

Even where there is ensured safety and regulatory approval there can be other obstacles. The 2013 film *Fire in the Blood* shows how pharmaceutical companies can block anti-AIDS medication for political reasons – leaving millions to die.

It is clear that biomedical research is a controversial area. It is vital that Scottish society is aware of these issues and that it has the tools to address them. The 2015 Film Festival on Biomedical Research Ethics, which is the first of its kind in the world, aims to do just that. It will be offering challenging films and engaging discussions between December 4-6 at the Edinburgh Filmhouse. At the end of each screening, a discussion will take place between the audience and a panel of experts in bioethics, law, philosophy and politics.

■ *Fiona Coyle is research associate with the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics*