Clinical trials are research studies to find better ways to treat a condition and/or symptoms. These trials examine the effects of new proposed drugs or combinations of drugs, or new different ways of delivering a dose of the drug.

Some trials include a control group who are given a placebo to ensure the drug being tested is compared with no treatment at all. Typically trials are double blind studies, which means neither the researchers nor the participants know who is getting the drug or the placebo. So being part of a trial does not always mean that you will receive the treatment being tested.

WHY HAVE A CLINICAL TRIAL?
The aim of a clinical trial is to find out if the new treatment or procedure is safe, has any side effects, or if it works better than current treatments.

Clinical trials can be divided into three distinct phases, all of which are required before a new drug or other treatment can be sold on the wider market.

- Phase 1 trials look at whether a trial treatment is safe or has any harmful effects.
- Phase 2 trials look at how well a treatment works.
- Phase 3 trials compare a new treatment with a current standard treatment. Some phase 3 trials are carried out after a drug has been licensed.

HOW ARE MY RIGHTS PROTECTED IF I TAKE PART IN A TRIAL?
An ethics committee, made up of scientists, health professionals and members of the public has to approve all trials before they start. This committee reviews clinical trials to make sure they are being run safely and can stop a trial if they are concerned for the welfare of the participants. Your privacy is protected by using a code instead of your name when recording information collected from you as part of the trial.

Researchers must also meet the established ethical standards in the National Ethics Advisory Committee ethical guidelines when undertaking health and disability research in New Zealand.

WHAT INFORMATION AM I ENTITLED TO WHEN DECIDING WHETHER TO TAKE PART IN A CLINICAL TRIAL?
A doctor, nurse or researcher will explain to you before the trial begins what will happen as part of the trial. You will need to sign a consent form, which will also explain why the trial is being done, the plan for each step in the trial, any side-effects you may have and how the trial may affect your daily life. You can ask any questions you have about the trial. You can also still change your mind and withdraw from the trial at any time. Even if you decide to withdraw it will not affect your ongoing medical care.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE END OF THE TRIAL?
If you are thinking of taking part in a clinical trial, check to see what will happen if it transpires that the drug or other treatment has improved your condition. In some studies where the drug proves to be effective, people in the placebo group are given the opportunity to also try the new drug. This will be part of the conditions of the trial and you should ask if this will be possible.

REGULATION OF NEW ZEALAND CLINICAL TRIALS
In order for a clinical trial to be carried out in New Zealand it must be approved by The Ministry of Health’s business unit, Medsafe. Approval is officially granted by the Director-General of Health on advice from the Health Research Council, through its Standing Committee on Therapeutic Trials (SCOTT). This committee assesses the clinical, scientific validity of the trial, the ability of the investigator to conduct the study and the study design and quality of clinical pharmacological research.

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?
Let your neurologist, other doctors and health professionals and your Parkinson’s Community Educator know that you are interested in clinical trials.

If you would like to put yourself on watch lists for any trials that come up, a regularly updated listing of New Zealand’s clinical trial partners and their capabilities is available at www.nzacres.org.nz/directory.

The Australian New Zealand Clinical Trials Registry (ANZCTR) is an online register of clinical trials being undertaken in Australia and New Zealand www.anzctr.org.au.

The International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations has created the first worldwide clinical trials portal www.ifpma.org

CORRECTION
The three poster winners from the 2015 Community Educator Conference were wrongly reported on in The Parkinsonian. The three winners were Paddy Sullivan, Chronic Disease Impact on Carers, Mary Lythe, Coping with Cognitive Changes in Parkinson’s and Lynn McLachlan, PSP.