JOURNAL OF CLINICAL RESEARCH BEST PRACTICES

Vol. 13, No. 9, September 2017 "Happy Trials to You"

Eight Questions to Ask Your Equipment Calibration Service Provider

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In a clinical trial, any piece of equipment worth using is worth calibrating. However, it is easy for clinical research site personnel to forget about equipment calibration until a site monitor points out that the calibration certificate has expired — assuming the site monitor can find the certificate at all. Large, busy sites like hospitals have formal equipment calibration programs, but these programs can be error-prone, and it can be time-consuming to manage all the different equipment types, locations, vendors, calibration requirements, certification types, and calibration service providers.

There are three main types of calibration service providers:

- Original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) that service their own equipment
- Calibration service providers A(CSPs) that are trained and certified by the OEM
- CSPs that are not trained and certified by the OEM

When a research site selects a CSP to calibrate its equipment, it should ask the following questions:

1. Is the service provider dedicated to the business of calibrating equipment, especially your type of equipment?

Most OEMs want their equipment to perform correctly, so their calibration departments generally meet high standards. Independent CSPs might not share that same level of commitment, especially for equipment that is not an important part of their business.

2. Has the OEM authorized the CSP to calibrate its equipment?

Authorized CSPs not only have personnel who are trained and certified by the OEM, they also typically have a special key to the equipment and access to a hidden calibration menu. Unauthorized CSPs can develop their own calibration procedures, but such calibrations will probably be less reliable and accurate. In addition, an authorized calibration technician can contact the OEM for assistance in case he or she encounters any difficulties.

3. Does the CSP have the necessary calibration resources?

Some equipment is best calibrated at the research site; other equipment is best calibrated at the CSP's site. In the former case, does the CSP technician have all the proper tools and supplies to perform the calibration? In the latter case, does the CSP technician also have facilities designed for that purpose?

4. Are calibration certificates readily available?

In the past, CSPs provided a paper copy of the calibration certificate to the customer, and kept the original for themselves. Today, they typically maintain the certificates on a secure online portal. Customers can download their certificates and, if they like, print them. With online storage, certificates never get lost or misplaced.

5. Will the CSP notify us when equipment needs recalibration?

The CSP should be able to use the same portal to notify you when your equipment is due for recalibration.

6. How many different types of equipment does the CSP calibrate?

Ideally, one CSP can calibrate all your equipment, but, if that is not possible, you probably want to minimize the number of CSPs you have to work with. Keep in mind that you might also need to obtain calibration for equipment provided by study sponsors.

7. Can the CSP recalibrate your equipment after each rental?

If you rent equipment, ask the CSP whether it recalibrates equipment after each rental to ensure that the equipment is working properly when you receive it and that you benefit from the full calibration period. In certain applications, some types of equipment (e.g., centrifuges, analytical balances, and environmental chambers) should be recalibrated after each rental.

8. Is the CSP cost-effective?

Considering all the costs — calibration fees, management time, and any equipment downtime — does the CSP deliver a cost-effective service?

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