Intellectual Property (IP) includes patents, copyrights, industrial designs, trademarks, and trade secrets and is protected by IP laws. Any form of exploitation, use, or copying of IP without authorisation, permission or allowance from the person who owns those rights or their representative can be considered a breach of IP laws. Clinicians involved in research are often not aware of IP regulations and may be prone to costly mistakes when designing study titles or acronyms. Social media are increasingly used to disseminate scientific knowledge, and snappy study names or acronyms invariably attract attention and larger numbers of followers, thereby propagating research ideas and activities widely.

Here we describe our experience with a national, multi-centre, longitudinal study observing the psychological impact on intensive care survivors treated for COVID-19 infection. The study is sponsored by Liverpool University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, funded by the Intensive Care Society, and endorsed by both the Trainee Research in Intensive Care (TRIC) network and the Clinical Research Network North West Coast. Over 100 patients had already been recruited, when a legal firm contacted the study team via the TRIC network email address and the study email address hosted by the Trust. Referring to the study Twitter handle, they informed us that the study acronym was already in use as the trademarked name of a United States-based financial company, which they represented. By using the acronym for research activities, we were infringing on the intellectual property rights of the company which were protected by law. Their email stated that the similarities in the company’s and our study’s Twitter handles could cause confusion, with their clients potentially thinking the study was affiliated with the financial company. We were told to cease and desist using the acronym immediately and forever.

We sought legal advice from the study Sponsor’s legal team, who recommended we heed the instructions to stop using the acronym without delay. Failure to adhere to the advice may have led to the Sponsor receiving service of legal proceedings, which would have had both a negative reputational impact and financial implications in responding to the proceedings. Ramifications of changing the study acronym have been time-consuming and costly. We needed to change the study logo, update all study documents and resubmit them to the Health Research Authority, resend documents to all sites, inform all bodies affiliated with the study, remove Twitter posts with the old acronym, change both our Twitter handle and the generic study email address, buy a new website domain and update the website content accordingly.

We share this experience to raise awareness within the research community in order to avoid similar problems in the future. We recommend that acronyms should be checked to ensure that a trademark does not already exist, as ignorance is not a defence. International trademark searches can be performed using free, online trademark databases. Trademark searches should become a routine step in the approval process by Sponsors and national guidance in how to open a study should be adjusted to reflect this recommendation.