Editorial

The COCHRANE COLLABORATION: a prime source of evidence-based answers to oral healthcare questions

WHAT IS THE COCHRANE COLLABORATION?

The Cochrane Collaboration [www.cochrane.org] is an international, non-profit, organisation that was established to ensure the worldwide availability of up-to-date and accurate information about the effects of healthcare interventions. It produces and disseminates systematic reviews of healthcare interventions, and promotes the search for evidence in the form of clinical trials and other studies of the effects of interventions.

The organisation was founded by a group of enthusiasts led by Iain Chalmers in 1993 and named in honor of the British epidemiologist Archie Cochrane (1908-1988). This small group of epidemiologists and clinicians set out to change medical practice. Their radical notion: Physicians should base treatment decisions on the best available evidence on whether a potential therapy is likely to work. And that evidence, they argued, isn’t likely to come from textbooks or a few large, controlled trials. Instead, they reasoned, the best way to see through the mass of data on a specific intervention would be to cull all available studies, give failing marks to any that don’t measure up, analyze the rest, and synthesize the results into a single “systematic review.”

WHAT DO WE DO?

The organisation relies on the effort of thousands of contributors worldwide, all working collaboratively from within many independent groups of people (‘entities’). These people work together whilst upholding the Cochrane Collaboration’s principles of fostering good communication, open decision-making and teamwork. www.cochrane.org/resources/leaflet.htm

Members of the organisation (mostly volunteers) seek to provide evidence to help people make decisions about health care. Some of the contributors search the healthcare literature electronically or by hand, others prepare and update Cochrane Reviews, whilst others work to improve the methods used in Cochrane Reviews and many others provide support facilities. The Cochrane Collaboration website provides information on a variety of ways of registering interest or becoming directly involved. www.cochrane.org/docs/involve.htm#involve
WHAT ARE COCHRANE REVIEWS?
Cochrane Reviews are systematic assessments of evidence of the effects of healthcare interventions, intended to help people to make informed decisions about health care, their own or someone else's. They are needed to help ensure that healthcare decisions throughout the world can be informed by high quality, timely research evidence. This is described in ‘Systematic reviews and The Cochrane Collaboration’ available at www.cochrane.org/docs/whycc.htm.

OUR STRUCTURE
There are more than 11,500 people, representing over 90 countries, working within the Collaboration. The membership of the organisation comprises of five different groups or ‘entities’:
1. **Collaborative Review Groups** consist of people who prepare, maintain, and update Cochrane Reviews. Each group focuses on specific areas of health, for example breast cancer, infectious diseases, and tobacco addition.
2. **Cochrane Centres** support people in their geographic and linguistic area. They are expected to provide training, help with translation and handsearching of regional journals. A world map showing the locations of Cochrane centres can be found at www.cochrane.org/contact/entities.htm#centres
3. **Method Groups** consist of people who develop the methodology of Cochrane Reviews. www.cochrane.org/contact/entities.htm#mglist
4. **Fields** focus on dimensions of health care other than specific health problems, such as the setting of care (primary care), the type of consumer (older people), or the type of intervention (vaccines). www.cochrane.org/contact/entities.htm#fieldlist
5. **Consumer Networks** provide an information forum directly for patients and consumer groups. www.cochrane.org/consumers

The **Steering Group** plans, develops and implements policy affecting the organization. It is guided by its Strategic Plan that develops goals, sets objectives and establishes policy.

**Funding** for the Collaboration’s central functions is derived from royalties gained by sales of subscriptions to *The Cochrane Library*. The individual entities are funded by a variety of governmental, institutional and private sources. The organization has developed a binding policy that is designed to limit the uses of funds derived from corporate sponsors, which includes commercial sponsorship and especially that which may influence the content or outcomes in its systematic reviews.

**Communication** amongst entities, members, and interested parties is achieved primarily through e-mail. Additionally there are printed newsletters, annual conferences and regional meetings.

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**The Oral Health Group**
The Oral Health Group was registered with the Collaboration on the 5th June 1994. The editorial base was set up in the USA under the coordinating editorship of Alexia Antczak Bouckoms. In June 1997 the editorial base was transferred to Manchester University UK, within the University’s Department of Dental Medicine and Surgery, with Professor Bill Shaw and Professor Helen Worthington as Co-ordinating Editors.

The Cochrane Oral Health Group aims to produce systematic reviews, which primarily include all randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of oral health. Oral health is broadly conceived to include the prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of oral, dental, and craniofacial diseases and disorders. The Cochrane Oral Health Group’s web site and latest newsletter (Issue 9 - summer 2004) is available at http://www.cochrane-oral.man.ac.uk/newsletter.htm.

**Accessibility of Cochrane Reviews**
These high quality evidenced-based reviews are published electronically by John Wiley and Sons in *The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* as part of The Cochrane Library [www.thecochranelibrary.com]. At present, well over 2000 full text articles are maintained, updated, and added to four publishing cycles per year. The Cochrane Library is published in both English and Spanish.

**How to get involved**
For newcomers www.cochrane.org/docs/involve.htm#involve would be your first step in learning more about the organization. For those who would like to help by searching the healthcare literature, additional online training is available through the following web site: www.webct.brown.edu/public/dickersin01. Dental professionals seeking more information may contact either the Oral Health Group or the authors directly.

Additional general information on the Cochrane Collaboration in a printable introductory leaflet is available at www.cochrane.org/resources/leaflet.htm.