Management of conflict of interest: the example of the Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration has developed strict rules to protect its systematic reviews from conflicts of interest.

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reated in 1993 and now established in nearly 90 countries, the non-profit Cochrane Collaboration has achieved an international reputation for the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, a collection of regularly updated reviews of the efficacy of a growing number of medical therapies and interventions for disease prevention. The Cochrane review methodology is strict and explicit (1-3).

The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews is the main documentary resource in the Cochrane Library. It is published four times a year, both on CD-ROM and online (a). In the last few years the Cochrane Collaboration has acquired the active support of health authorities in a number of countries (in South and Central America, Australia, Spain, Ireland, Iceland, Finland, Norway and the United Kingdom). Health care professionals and the public in these countries have benefited from free (publicly funded) access to the online Cochrane Library.

Strict and explicit methods

Thousands of contributors (editors, authors and peer reviewers) participate, on an unpaid basis, in the production of systematic reviews for the Cochrane Collaboration. In general, teams of unpaid authors propose subjects (“titles”) for review articles to one of the 50 thematic editorial teams (“collaborative review groups”) covering nearly all fields of medicine.

The interventions, target populations and outcomes assessed during systematic reviews are first agreed upon with the editorial team. Once the title has been defined and accepted, the authors write a detailed protocol describing how the data will be analysed. The protocol must be published in the Cochrane Library before the analytical work begins.

The editorial teams maintain the responsibility and the right to approve publication, in the Cochrane Library, of protocols and systematic review articles (and updates) covered by their field of interest (b).

Funding sources and conflict of interest: clearly stated for each review

The work of the steering group and coordinating office of the Cochrane Collaboration is funded by subscriptions to the Cochrane Library.

Conflict of interest. Authors, who sometimes work free of charge, generally receive financial support from a variety of sources (mainly universities and government agencies). Funding sources and authors’ potential conflicts of interest are always listed at the end of each Cochrane review article.

A section of the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions (an official reference manual intended for authors of Cochrane reviews) deals with conflict-of-interest statements (4). It specifies that “Cochrane Reviews should be free of any real or perceived bias introduced by the receipt of any benefit in cash or kind, any hospitality, or any subsidy derived from any source that may have or be perceived to have an interest in the outcome of the review. It is a matter of Cochrane Collaboration policy that direct funding from a single source with a vested interest in the results of the review is not acceptable” (4).

Two review articles jointly funded by a pharmaceutical company rekindled a debate on conflict of interest within the Cochrane Collaboration. In 2001, two reviews, 

References


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each assessing the efficacy of an antimigraine drug and partly funded by Pfizer, were published in the Cochrane Library (5,6). One of these reviews focused on eletriptan, a Pfizer product (5).

The Conflict of Interest section of the two articles stated that Pfizer was one of several funding sources, and summarised the terms of the contract signed between the authors and the company: Pfizer agreed not to intervene in the preparation of the review or in the publication of its results, and to provide the authors with all published and unpublished clinical data on patients having participated in clinical trials of eletriptan (5,6).

Despite the transparency of this statement, some members of the Cochrane Collaboration expressed profound concern and restated their opposition to even partial funding of Cochrane reviews by pharmaceutical firms, fearing it could undermine the image of the Cochrane Collaboration and the credibility of its reviews (7,8).

No funding by for-profit organisations with a vested interest in the conclusions of a review

The debate resulted in a consultation of all members of the Cochrane Collaboration in December 2003 and January 2004 on the funding of its units (author groups, Collaborative Review Groups, etc.) and products (systematic review articles, etc.).

New rules published in April 2004 prohibit the funding of a Cochrane review or its update by a for-profit company that might realise a material advantage from the conclusions of the review (6-9).

The new rules also do not allow such companies to fund Collaborative Review Groups, or related groups such as the Consumer Collaboration, which includes patients involved in the preparation of systematic reviews (http://www.cochrane.org/consumers), the Cancer Collaboration, the Complementary Medicine Field, or the Vaccines Field.

Recognizing the potential financial implications of Cochrane reviews for public health institutions, the new rules allow Cochrane reviews to be funded by government agencies and not-for-profit health insurers. Commercial enterprises with no conflict of interest with a given Cochrane review may also provide financial support. However, no financial contributor to a Cochrane review may exert any influence whatsoever on the preparation of the review or its publication (9).

Arbitration in ambiguous situations

To deal with unforeseen circumstances and problems involving funding sources, a member of the Steering Group was designated as the Funding Arbiter. If necessary, the arbiter can designate and chair a three-member jury. One of the first tasks of this new arbitration service was to re-examine all published Cochrane reviews whose funding sources do not comply with the new rules, and to decide whether or not they should be removed from the Cochrane Library. The arbiter also examines cases in which an author of a systematic review article has been employed by a pharmaceutical company or manufacturer of medical devices.

This new policy now applies to new funding sources for all groups within the Cochrane Collaboration that are involved in the production of systematic reviews (d).

A two-year delay was allowed so that those whose existing funding sources do not comply with the new rules could seek alternative financing.

Few public or private providers of medical information aimed at health care professionals or the general public have such a clear policy on commercial funding sources. The Cochrane Collaboration provides an excellent example of how to manage conflicts of interest.

Selected references from Prescrire’s literature search.