

Statement of Cochrane Work Review Group Editorial Base on recent developments in Cochrane

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Jos Verbeek, Coordinating Editor

You may have heard of the conflict that has recently taken place in the Governing Board of Cochrane. On September 13th, 2018 the Board voted on whether to expel Prof Peter Gøtzsche from the Board by terminating his membership of Cochrane. Of the 12 members (excluding Prof Gøtzsche), six voted in favour, five voted against and four resigned from the Board themselves in protest, and one member abstained from voting. Because of the resignations, Cochrane rules mandated that another two appointed members of the Board had to resign voluntarily to maintain the proportions of elected and appointed members. The process resulted in the remaining six Board members unanimously expelling Prof Gøtzsche from the Board and terminating his membership in Cochrane. This will have an impact on how Cochrane functions and on how the outside world will view Cochrane. Here I would like to give my view on the conflict.

Who is Prof Peter Gøtzsche? He is one of the founding members of the Cochrane Collaboration. During the past 25 years, he has contributed immensely to the achievements of Cochrane. He has also developed very outspoken ideas about evidence and the role of the pharmaceutical industry especially in relation to psychopharmacological drugs and vaccines. He has written books about these topics which have attracted a lot of publicity. Some call him an extremist for his outspoken views. Not surprisingly, he has criticized current Cochrane policy on conflict of interest of review authors. He believes that none of the authors of a Cochrane review should have a conflict of interest based on grants or payments from the pharmaceutical industry. The current requirement is that this is allowed for a minority of the authors. Last year, he was elected to the Governing Board of Cochrane with the largest number of votes. In his election campaign, it was very clear that he opposed the current trend of Cochrane angling to become a professional publishing company.

The content of the current conflict is at best unclear. The Governing Board states that Gøtzsche's expulsion is due to 'harassment and personal attacks' on employees of Cochrane but they haven't revealed any details. The board states that after consultation with their lawyer they had no other option than to expel Peter Gøtzsche. In a later statement, they explained that it was about 'disruptive behaviour over many years' without giving any details. [You can find this statement here.](#) Peter Gøtzsche denies any wrong doing and has made all correspondence with the Governing Board public. You can find it all on his website: www.deadlymedicines.dk

Because the Board keeps repeating that this is not about Peter Gøtzsche's views on evidence-based medicine and systematic reviews but about his behaviour towards staff, such as Cochrane CEO Mark Wilson, we can only see this as an ordinary workplace conflict. In the statements of the board and those made by Peter Gøtzsche, we notice that no attempt has been taken to try to solve this workplace conflict in other ways than by voting on whether to expel him. We strongly believe that if engaged at an early stage, mediation, instead of legal action, could have given a different course to this conflict and could have limited the damage.

Given that the proposed actions were so divisive for Cochrane as demonstrated by the resignation of four of the elected members of the Board, it would have been wise if the remaining members would have stepped down. New elections would then have enabled a new start. There was no legal obligation for them to resign but the remaining members chose to remain and expel Peter Gøtzsche.

We are very worried about the Board's vague formulation of 'bad' or 'disruptive behaviour' in all the statements the Board has given as the reason for expulsion because it is not clear if this refers to his behavior in the public domain or in personal dealings with Cochrane management. It is also worrying how the two parties' understanding regarding the reasons that led to this outcome are so different. Whereas Peter Gøtzsche believes that he was ousted because of allegedly breaching the Cochrane spokesperson policy (portraying his own views as those of Cochrane) – which he vehemently denies – the Board highlights his behavior when communicating privately with other people in Cochrane. Regardless of whichever is the true reason, we believe that this vagueness opens the door for suppressing unwelcome views on where Cochrane should go. We still need fresh views more than ever before. Even though the Board says that opinions are not at the basis of Peter Gøtzsche's expulsion, the statements are contradictory in this respect. It seems that his views on the Cochrane HPV vaccine review did play a role in the conflict.

It is unclear how this will develop further. Peter Gøtzsche is the director of the Nordic Cochrane Center which to our knowledge contributes substantially to the daily activities of the collaboration. As the NCC is an independent unit funded by the Danish government and not by Cochrane, the Cochrane Governing Board does not actually have jurisdiction to fire Prof Gøtzsche from his post as director, which they claim to have done. So, there is also an element of the absurd here too. We will keep you informed.



Jos Verbeek, Coordinating Editor

Cochrane Work
Kuopio, FINLAND