

Managing expectations: what does Cochrane expect of authors, and what can authors expect of Cochrane?

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Background

The preparation and maintenance of high quality systematic reviews requires contributors with diverse competencies and skills, supported by staff from the editorial bases of Cochrane Review Groups (CRGs) and Centres. Cochrane is committed to encouraging wide participation in which the opportunities to contribute should be equally available to all. In practice, reconciling the Cochrane's principles of inclusivity with the limited capacity of CRGs and Centres to offer open-ended support necessarily means that the CRGs have to be pragmatic when considering approaches from new review teams. For authors who are thinking about preparing a Cochrane Review, there needs to be clear information about what is expected of them in terms of skills and competencies, and in return what they can expect from CRGs and Centres by way of training and support.

Accepting that there are considerable variations across CRGs and Centres and international settings, the following policy sets out the broad expectations of author teams, CRGs and Centres, and forms the basis of a 'contract' between authors, CRGs and Centres.

Cochrane Review author teams

Cochrane Reviews have to be prepared by at least two people, and often may require more than two. A team must have among its members the range of skills and experience in order to complete a Cochrane Review to the standard required by Cochrane and that the users of Cochrane Reviews have come to expect. These skills and experience include:

- content knowledge relating to the topic of the review;
- basic knowledge of systematic review methodology (including formulating the review question and eligibility criteria, searching and assessing the risk of bias of relevant studies);
- basic statistical knowledge in order to extract appropriate data, conduct meta-analyses where appropriate, and interpret and discuss the results;
- the ability to write a scientific report of publishable standard in English;
- project management and leadership ability within the team (usually the named Contact Person).

In addition, all authors of a review team should:

- approach the review with scientific rigour, be as objective as possible, and avoid conflicts of interest;
- be comprehensive, systematic and methodical in their approach to all aspects of the review;
- follow the advice and guidance in the *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions*, taking account of any specific instructions or preferences a CRG may have.

The named Contact Person should:

- submit a fully completed Cochrane Review Proposal Form on behalf of the review team, with realistic and achievable timelines for completion of the protocol and full Review;
- submit a current CV or provide evidence of previous experience in preparing systematic reviews, if requested;
- keep in touch with their CRG about their progress;
- respond to correspondence from their CRG in a timely manner.

The review team should be aware of its limitations, be willing to receive and respond to suggestions from the CRG editorial team and referees, be willing and able to see the review through to completion, and to address updates.

To help authors, once a title has been accepted and registered, Cochrane provides a range of training covering the steps involved in preparing a Cochrane Review (e.g. online learning, workshops and webinars). This does not mean Cochrane has the resources or capacity to provide open-ended support to teams of novice review authors; authors are still expected to be familiar with the principles of systematic reviewing and to demonstrate that they have the capacity to complete a review.

Despite support and encouragement, sometimes review teams struggle to make sufficient progress with their review, or they submit draft versions that would require too much input from the CRG editorial team to meet acceptable standards. In these circumstances, the CRG may decide to withdraw the review from the authors, citing concerns over quality and the capacity of the review team to complete the review.

It should be recognized that throughout the process of review preparation (be it at the title registration, protocol or review stage) the review could be taken out of the editorial process due to concerns about quality that cannot be resolved.

Cochrane Review Groups (CRGs)

CRG editorial teams should provide details on their website of the support they can provide to their review teams. The support provided may vary from CRG to CRG and may change over time as the CRG matures or circumstances change. CRGs need to ensure that their limited resources are used to the maximum benefit of the users and funders of the CRG, so that decisions in relation to prioritization of reviews are inevitable.

CRG editorial teams should:

- make explicit to potential review teams the level and type of support they can provide;
- acknowledge receipt of completed Cochrane Review Proposal Forms and inform the authors within two weeks of receipt of the Review Proposal Form when they can expect to receive feedback on their proposal;

- provide potential review teams with up-to-date details of the editorial process and timelines for new proposals submitted for editorial consideration, including information concerning prioritization of topics;
- respond to correspondence from their review teams in a timely manner;
- put potential review teams in touch with their reference Cochrane Centre if required.

Cochrane Centres

Cochrane Centres and Associate Centres provide different types of training to review authors, either formally through courses, workshops and webinars, or informally through individual support. Differences in the resources available at Centres and Associate Centres mean that the level and volume of training and support on offer varies considerably. Despite these differences in capacity, Centres and Associate Centres are expected to provide a minimum level of support. For example, some authors may require additional help in navigating Cochrane processes, especially if they are from countries where systematic reviews are less familiar or English is not their first language. Likewise, if there are communication issues or disputes between author teams and CRGs, then Centres and Associate Centres should offer to mediate.

In respect of training and support, as a minimum Centres and Associate Centres should:

- provide advice to prospective review authors on the requirements, expectations and processes of preparing a Cochrane Review;
- indicate what sources of support are available locally, including listings of relevant workshops and courses;
- ensure the training provided is consistent with the Cochrane's approved training resources;
- help resolve any communication issues or disputes between CRGs and authors, either with respect to registering a title or completing the protocol /review.