

Conversation between Dr. Sue Kinn, Team Leader and Research Manager at the Department for International Development (DFID) and Stephanie Wykstra (GiveWell), August 21, 2012

Summary

DFID funds the Cochrane Infectious Diseases (ID) Review Group. Dr. Paul Garner, Coordinating Editor of the Cochrane ID group, recommended that we speak with Dr. Kinn, who is a key contact for Cochrane at DFID.

- DFID funds the Effective Healthcare Research Programme Consortium (RPC), which is made up of the Cochrane Infectious Diseases (ID) Review Group based in Liverpool as well as other partners including colleagues working at Cochrane Centers in South Africa and India. For 2011-2017, DFID is providing six million pounds to the Consortium. Previous funding (2005-2010) was about four million pounds.
- In Developing Countries there is a need for further capacity, for both researchers to conduct high-quality reviews as well as editorial and other kinds of support for authors.
- Dr. Kinn told us that Cochrane reviews are consistently high in quality (more so than many other systematic reviews). Through the Consortium DFID funds the production of reviews that are particularly relevant to the developing world. DFID is interested in evaluating the impact of Cochrane's reviews, for example the impact on WHO guidelines and government policy in the developing world.

Note: This is a set of summary notes compiled by GiveWell in order to give an overview of the major points made by Dr. Sue Kinn in conversation.

The Effective Healthcare Consortium

DFID has been funding the Effective Healthcare Consortium, a research consortium which includes the Cochrane ID review group, for more than 10 years. The consortium includes partners involved in Cochrane Centers in South Africa and India, as well as some non-Cochrane affiliates. This is the only Cochrane review group that DFID is currently funding, although individuals from other groups may receive DFID funding for specific pieces of work.

The current funding for the consortium started in 2011 and is for six million pounds over six years. Previous funding, which began in 2005, was for around four million pounds over five years. DFID provides core funding for an agreed programme of work. The consortium must discuss any potential funding changes with DFID.

DFID's funding of the Effective Healthcare Consortium includes some support for the Cochrane editorial group which supports the production of protocols and reviews. DFID funding has also helped researchers access primary literature. DFID does not request a specific number of reviews for a certain amount of funding. Some reviews may be straightforward while others could be quite complex, and so the time to complete them varies significantly. DFID instead compares the reviews completed to how many reviews the group initially estimated they would complete and/or update

Dr. Kinn noted that most Cochrane work is done through a network of volunteers, however, funding is sometimes helpful to fund reviewers to take leave from their regular work in order to complete a review.

The consortium also focuses on the presentation of reviews. For instance, the Cochrane deworming review has generated a lot of discussion, globally. The review was presented, taking into account policy issues and allowing for the on-going debate to be carried out in a public, transparent manner. Currently, the consortium is looking at how reviews which include complex evidence can be presented in a way that will interface successfully with policy makers.

The influence of Cochrane reviews

DFID looks to Cochrane's systematic reviews as evidence to inform policy. Cochrane reviews are credible and often of higher quality than reviews produced by other groups.

DFID measures Cochrane's influence by looking at where reviews are being used, for example by guideline developers at the World Health Organization (WHO), to ensure that they use the highest level evidence to develop their norms and standards. DFID also looks at whether Cochrane's research influences governments in the developing world.

Cochrane's further funding needs

The Cochrane Collaboration is a network of volunteers and there is always a need for further funds to support the work overall. There is limited capacity, particularly in the developing world, to undertake systematic reviews. Researchers in the developing world may not have access to all the relevant literature and they may not have expert support needed to help them search for literature, support them in particular technical aspects of writing reviews, etc. Cochrane groups build capacity as part of their activities, but they are not always able to meet all the needs.

DFID's funding process

DFID awards research funding following open competition. The process followed depends on the nature of the research, the funding partners and the funding model being adopted. For RPCs, DFID awards funding to groups of researchers working together. An RPC consists of a lead organization working with 3-4 partner organizations to do research on a particular theme. DFID requires that at least three of the partner organizations be based in the developing world.

DFID follows a two stage process in allocating funding for research in RPCs. In the first stage, DFID issues a call for proposals and sets out areas of interest, e.g., meeting unmet needs for family planning, strengthening health systems, delivering effective healthcare services, etc. Areas of interest are identified following external consultations, priorities set by the British government, research gaps identified in the literature, and major unanswered questions in the field. When themes are identified DFID provides examples of research questions within these themes as suggested areas for future work. DFID asks applicants for a brief outline discussing the proposed area of research broadly, the governance and partnership arrangements in the proposed consortium, staff expertise, plans for

capacity building, and how research will be disseminated.

In the second stage, DFID selects the best technical submissions and invites those applicants to submit full proposals. The full proposals include details of the research to be undertaken, including the expected impacts, outcomes, and activities. DFID uses external and internal peer reviewers to assess the quality of the proposals and whether the proposed workplan is realistic. As part of the proposals applicants submit a logframe – which includes details of outputs e.g. for evidence synthesis, a target number of reviews which they will produce and/or update.

When funding is awarded DFID has a relationship with the lead organization in a consortium. Relations between partners and lead organizations are managed by the lead organization. However, DFID anticipates that relationships between partners will be strengthened during the course of the programme. Dr. Kinn noted that the partnerships within the RPC including the Cochrane group tends to be strong.

Additional information

The Campbell Collaboration (a sister organization to Cochrane), which has more of a social policy focus than Cochrane, and cannot always follow Cochrane's methods and standards for research because of the different nature of the evidence available for its systematic reviews. Some members of the Campbell Collaboration may receive DFID funding for specific pieces of work.