

Conversation between Dr. Martin Burton (Director of the UK Cochrane Center) and Stephanie Wykstra (GiveWell) on September 6, 2012

Summary:

- We spoke to Dr. Martin Burton in order to further our understanding of the funding opportunities within the Cochrane Collaboration.
- About half of the 53 Cochrane review website have editorial bases in the UK, 34% of the 20,000 Cochrane authors and nearly 28% of all participants in the Collaboration are based in the UK. The UK Cochrane Center is funded by the UK government.
- Dr. Burton believes that funding authors to conduct prioritized reviews is a promising direction for the Cochrane Collaboration to take; funding prioritized reviews would allow a funder to reliably increase the number of important reviews that are completed.
- Another potential use of further funding: Cochrane Centers could use further funding to conduct outreach activities in order to increase the awareness of and use of Cochrane reviews among practitioners, policy-makers and consumers.

Note: *this is not a verbatim transcript. It is a set of summary notes compiled by GiveWell in order to give an overview of the major points made by Martin Burton in conversation.*

The UK Cochrane Center's activities and funding

- Cochrane Centers offer training courses; the UK Cochrane Center has a set of four courses for authors, and authors come to Oxford to complete the courses. Cochrane review group editorial bases and methods groups offer practical support to authors, help in the search for studies to include in reviews, and provide other kinds of technical support during the review production process.
- The current funding for UK Cochrane activities (total, among all UK entities) is approximately 5 million pounds per year from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). Grants are given on a 5 year cycle. There are six staff members at the UK Cochrane Center and an additional group of associates who help with the Center's activities.
- The UK Cochrane Center was the first Cochrane center founded. About half of the 53 Cochrane review website have editorial bases in the UK, 34% of the 20,000 Cochrane authors and nearly 28% of all participants in the Collaboration are based in the UK. The UK Cochrane Center is responsible for contributors and entities in the UK, Ireland and the Middle East, and has a branch in Bahrain as well.
<http://ukcc.cochrane.org/about-uk-cochrane-centre>

The Cochrane Collaboration's activities and direction

- Near the beginning of the process of forming a new review group, groups tend to have many authors in one country because often there is an enthusiastic person in that country who gathers colleagues and others to write reviews. Later on as they grow, review groups support authors in many different countries.
- Traditionally, Cochrane centers have played the role primarily of training authors and helping to support review groups and authors in their geographic area. A new role that Cochrane centers increasingly play is promoting the use, understanding and dissemination of systematic reviews within a wider community.
- The Cochrane Editor-in-Chief's role is very important to the Collaboration; the Editor-in-Chief (Dr. David Tovey) has a global view of the outputs of the various groups and is in charge of the quality and content of reviews overall. There is another central leadership position as well – the Chief Executive; this role has only recently been re-filled.
- Dr. Burton believes that a small but increasing proportion of Cochrane reviews are being done by professional reviewers who are paid for their work, rather than reviews being written solely by volunteers. His personal view is that funding professional reviewers is a good way of getting priority reviews done quickly, efficiently and well.
- Dr. Burton emphasized that it is important for the Cochrane Collaboration to continue to welcome and appreciate the efforts of volunteers in various capacities, even if the model moves further towards one involving the funding of professional reviewers.

Funding opportunities within the Cochrane Collaboration

- The United Kingdom government (NIHR) provides funding in the form of program grants for groups doing systematic reviews, by putting out a call for proposals, generally within particular topic areas.
- On the question of whether direct funding for reviews or indirect funding (for training and other activities) would be better able to produce more reviews: it's not clear how readily / the extent to which capacity-building and training translates into additional reviews. By contrast, when paying professionals to produce reviews, it's possible to have high confidence that specific high-quality reviews will result from the funding.
- One way to provide further funding within the Collaboration would be to put out a call for reviews in high priority areas (i.e., either of high value globally or to a specific geographic area). The call for proposals could be made directly to review groups, which often have lists of prioritized reviews; an alternative would be to allow authors to propose review topics directly with the endorsement of a review group editorial base. The funding could also be disseminated centrally for the purpose of funding prioritized reviews, through the Editor-in-Chief's office.
- There's also a need for further funding for dissemination of reviews. This funding could be used by Cochrane Centers for a variety of outreach activities. It's not

enough to just produce systematic reviews; it is also essential to get the reviews into practice.

- One program at the UK Cochrane Center is the new “engagement program.” This is a program in which Cochrane members reach out to local healthcare payers, practitioners and patients in order to raise awareness and use of Cochrane reviews. In some cases, this involves conducting training: for example, Dr. Burton will be giving a one day workshop on evidence-based decision-making and the Cochrane Collaboration for the British Society of Surgery of the Hand. The purpose is not only that some audience members might become Cochrane authors, but that many of them will start using systematic reviews in their daily practice.
- Another program for outreach is improving the number and quality of web resources educating the public on the use of high-quality evidence and on Cochrane reviews. An example of a project like this is the Alois community (<http://alois.cochrane.org/>), which provides research and evidence to caregivers of those with dementia. There is some funding available for these outreach activities; the UK government has given “engagement awards” for projects such as the Alois community.