

Are volunteers authoring Cochrane reviews? A brief investigation.

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Background

The Cochrane Collaboration encourages wide participation by a diverse range of individuals. It seeks to reduce barriers to such participation by programmes of training and support. It has often been thought and said that the majority of Cochrane reviews are produced by 'volunteers'. However, in some countries, professional systematic reviewers are increasingly being employed to prepare commissioned Cochrane reviews and healthcare workers are given 'protected time' to do Cochrane work. We sought to answer this question: to what extent are Cochrane reviews being prepared by 'volunteers' rather than individuals who are either directly paid to do them or who (being health professionals and researchers) undertake reviews as part of their portfolio of professional work? In embarking on this project we were aware that there might be difficulties in defining and identifying 'voluntary' work. We expected the project to provide insights that might inform more in-depth qualitative research to understand better the reasons why healthcare professionals undertake Cochrane reviews.

Objectives

(1) To establish and implement a method of categorisation of those who prepare Cochrane reviews, based on the degree to which their participation is voluntary. (2) Based on a recent sample of Cochrane reviews, to determine the proportion that is the result of professional, semi-professional or volunteer effort.

Methods

All new reviews published in the *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* in *The Cochrane Library* for one month (Issue 9, 2011) were retrieved and information extracted about the authors, including their review group, affiliations and sources of support. The lead author of each review was contacted for further information on each author's primary reason for working on the review, selecting from four categories (see Table below)

Results

In Issue 9, 2011 of *The Cochrane Library* 34 new Cochrane reviews were published and they were prepared by 131 authors from 21 review groups. There were 32 different lead authors and 26 (81%) responded and provided information for 105/131 authors (80%). (An affiliation to a hospital or university was recorded in the published reviews in *The Cochrane Library* for all authors.) The authors' primary reason for conducting the review was given as follows:

	N	% (of 131)	95% CI (%)
1 As part of their job	40	31	23 to 38
2 As part of a course or training exercise	7	5	1.5 to 9
3 As part of their personal career development or for academic credit	41	31	23 to 39
4 Voluntarily (for none of the above reasons)	17	13	7 to 19

The 40 professional authors were involved in 20 of the 34 reviews. One review was prepared solely by volunteer authors. Some authors who responded to the survey commented on the difficulties they had in selecting a single category and made it clear that authors contribute a significant amount of personal time when working on their reviews, irrespective of their primary reason for involvement, or the professional benefits that might accrue.

Conclusions

Based on a small sample of recent Cochrane reviews, nearly a third of authors are professionally employed to do reviews and 20 of the 34 reviews include one or more professional authors (59%). Conversely, the proportion of authors who are unpaid, and prepare reviews neither as part of a training endeavour nor specifically to enhance their personal career development or obtain academic credit is small – 13%.

Whilst many obtain personal, educational or professional benefit from undertaking a Cochrane review, this is not necessarily what drives them to do so. Comments we received from authors reinforce what we believe – that many people undertake Cochrane work and do some or all of it in their 'spare time', even though it might be seen as a professional or educational activity.

"Implications for practice"

If the proportion of Cochrane reviews undertaken by professional reviewers continues to increase, this is likely to have a number of consequences for "practice" within the Collaboration. It might impact upon the nature and extent of the workload of the editorial bases of Review Groups. In order for the Collaboration to continue to welcome and encourage wide participation, we may need to identify new ways of welcoming and integrating that broad and heterogeneous group of individuals. Rather than being directed immediately towards the preparation of a systematic review, alternative roles, tasks and responsibilities could be offered in areas such as prioritisation, dissemination and implementation.

Implications for research

There are a wide variety of potential reasons why health professionals and researchers undertake the preparation of Cochrane reviews outside (a) normal working hours, and (b) the usual boundaries of their professional activities. Future research should try and 'capture' the degree to which these activities are 'voluntary' – being over and above what is expected for those individuals. It would also be helpful to understand why Cochrane activities are chosen rather than other professionally-related out-of-hours activities.