

# CRG Structure & Function project

## Summary of Internal Advisory Group meetings, November/December 2013

### What are the strengths of current ways of working and existing structures?

In response to the question on strengths, there were many comments that related to the sense of identity created by having small groups clustering around one subject area. Proximity of the team to one another, a shared passion for the subject matter, opportunities for high quality communication, mutual support and the benefit of role clarity were all cited as advantages. One person who is not a member of a CRG editorial team also said "each CRG is an embassy for Cochrane in its setting - the local face of the Collaboration". The relationship with the host institution was also mentioned positively - some appear willing to forego hosting costs for example.

There was also a sense of community across Cochrane. In one group several members described their concern that CRGs would become "a factory making widgets" - that there would be a loss of autonomy and creativity in such a process. One person referred to Dame Sally Davies' presentation in Oxford encouraging Cochrane to retain its iconoclasts. Colloquia were seen as very important for those who were able to attend: one consumer suggested that there should be more regional meetings to encourage wider participation.

Another area of benefit that was commented on related to geographical distribution. Several people stated that having CRGs across different regions was an important message - and that having CRGs based in countries where English is not a first language and also in LMICs was important.

The support provided for search was mentioned several times as a positive and unique feature of Cochrane. Others described the overall support provided by CRG teams in similar terms. The leadership role of Co-ordinating Editors was also seen as important.

Finally, one group member decried the risk of "change for change's sake". It was important that any change was linked directly to explicit and agreed aims and objectives.

### What are the challenges created by current structures?

The challenges included examples where the benefits above were not realised e.g. when leadership was provided rarely or irregularly, where strong communication was not the rule, and where CRG teams were unable to provide support to authors due to restricted resources or competing priorities.

The editorial process in general aroused some criticism, mainly but not always from people outside the CRG teams: long delays, poor or brusque communication, inconsistent editing. One Centre representative said that it was "impressive when CRGs reject a title but provide clear and transparent feedback", however this was not consistently applied. There were concerns about prejudice in terms of the response to authors from certain regions and members proposed increasing transparency about this and also in relation to CRG priorities.

From the other perspective there were concerns about the challenges caused by poor submissions and review author teams who lack crucial skills. CRG team members, including Co-Eds described the challenge of isolation, and also delay caused by individual staff absence. One Co-Ed stated that "groups are too small and overly dependent on a few people". There is disparity between groups in terms of resources, and access to statistical and methodological expertise, and little evidence of CRGs or groups sharing resources in such circumstances, even when they are co-located.

Several representatives from consumers and Fields described samples of close shared working with CRG teams but this was the exception rather than the rule.

Two groups discussed the professional development and career opportunities available for CRG teams - these were thought to be very limited or patchy.

Editorial teams were also identified as being sometimes problematic - with limited availability, long delays in responses, and inconsistent quality of input. However, at the same time it was acknowledged that the rewards for editors were grossly insufficient - with limited investment in training for editors, insufficient academic recognition or any other form of reward.

Consumers were regarded as a major benefit for Cochrane, and in general comments from the consumers were well received and positive. However one consumer notes that "we only get a call when the group wants something".

Maintaining the quality of published reviews was identified as a challenge: one group member identified statistics as an area where some reviews did not reflect current best practice: other comments were more generic stating that a proportion of reviews published by CRGs were not of high enough standard. Some group members noted that expectations of quality and the increasing complexity of reviews was a challenge. New review types, such as DTA reviews were particularly challenging and time consuming. In addition there was discussion on the merit of including non-randomised studies, and the challenges and issues associated with this. One consumer said that reviews were too long and proposed a prize to be given each year for conciseness.

#### Potential solutions identified

In general there was scepticism about solutions. Finding a way forward is also recognised as being made more difficult because, whilst many contributors were fully of the context of their own groups, they had little knowledge of the challenges or support available to others.

Whilst fewer, larger CRGs would create capacity there was no enthusiasm for such contraction - indeed several group members felt that ideally there would be more groups, whether CRGs or satellites.

An experienced Co-Ed proposed the following:

- Keep everything that is currently a strength
- Manage variation of quality across CRGs
- Avoid bureaucratic solutions, such as checklists, processes.

Resources were seen as a major issue and some members felt that Cochrane should invest more in the CRGs. Others proposed that training and learning opportunities should be prioritised.