



# Feedback on Cochrane Reviews: how much is there and what happens to it?

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## Background

Users of *The Cochrane Library* are able to submit comments on Cochrane Reviews and Protocols, enabling review authors and editorial teams to amend or update reviews when they are made aware of new information, errors, or areas of confusion.[1] The aims of soliciting comments are to improve the quality of published reviews and to maintain engagement with users, but we need more information on the fate and impact of recently submitted comments to assess whether those aims are being met.

Submitted comments are managed and screened by an editorial team at John Wiley & Sons. Any comment that is coherent and relates to the content of the Cochrane Review or Protocol is passed on to the relevant Cochrane Review Group (CRG).[2] The CRG decides how to respond and what actions to take as a result. Comments may or may not be published as part of the review or protocol.

## Objectives

To explore how the number of comments received, published and responded to has changed over time, and to assess how long this process takes and how often Cochrane Reviews are amended or updated as a result.

## Methods

We looked at comments submitted via *The Cochrane Library* comments system or via the Ovid platform during 2013. We looked on The Cochrane Library and in Archie to determine whether and when those comments were published, and whether a response was published, and how long that process took. Where a comment was not published we endeavoured to find out why not, by looking at the comment and by asking CRG Managing Editors. We also looked to see whether the review or protocol had been amended or updated in light of the comment.

## How many comments are there?

During 2013, the Wiley team processed 157 submitted comments, 128 of which (82%) were assessed as valid comments and passed to CRGs. This represents a large increase compared with 2012 and preceding years (Figure 1).

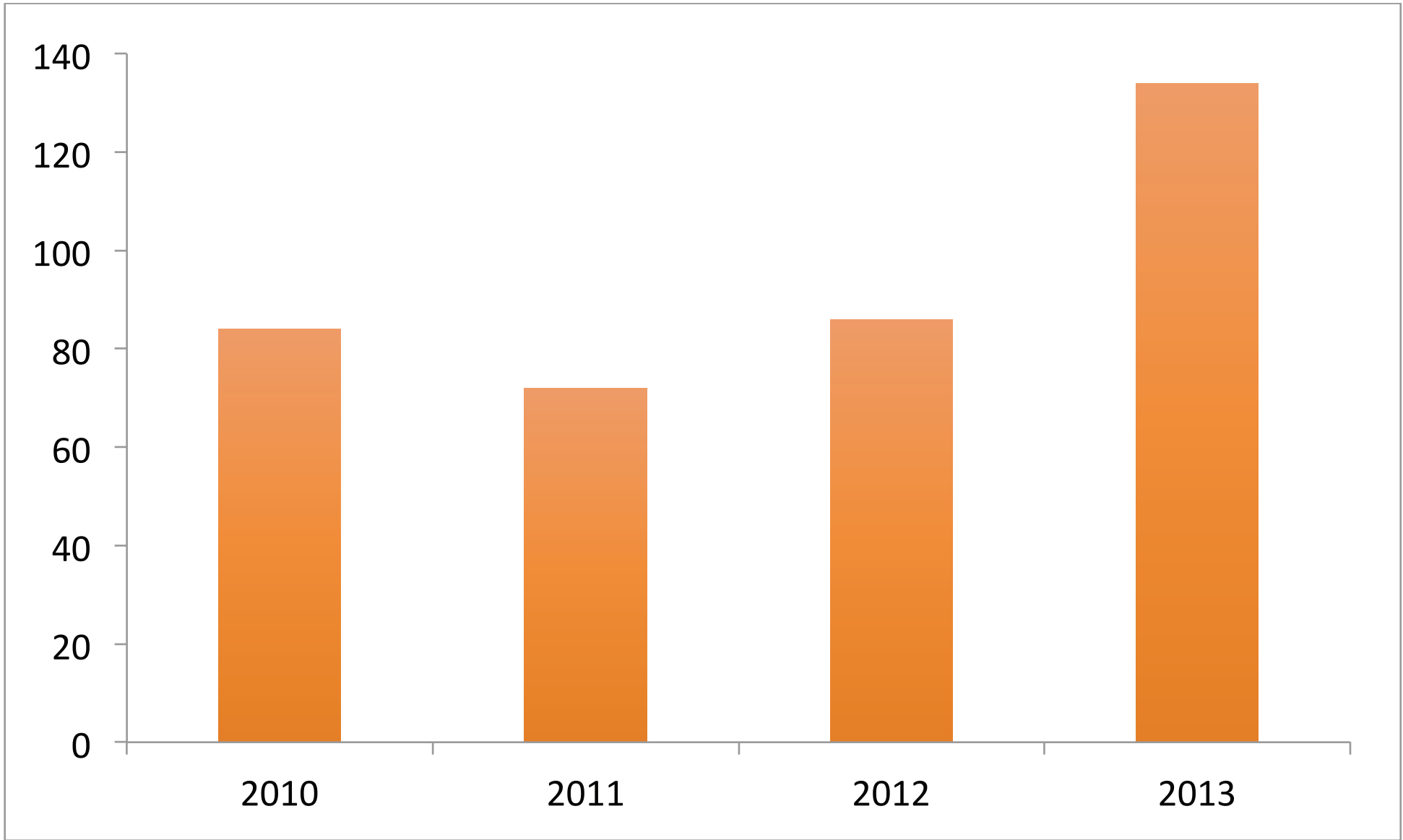


Figure 1: Comments received, 2010 to 2013

## Which CRGs get the comments?

42 of the 53 CRGs received at least one comment, and one CRG, the Acute Respiratory Infections Group, received 12 comments.

## Are comments published, and are responses published?

Of the 128 comments passed to CRGs during 2013, 59 (46%) were published, and 49 of the published comments were accompanied by published responses from the authors or the CRG editorial team. See Figure 2.

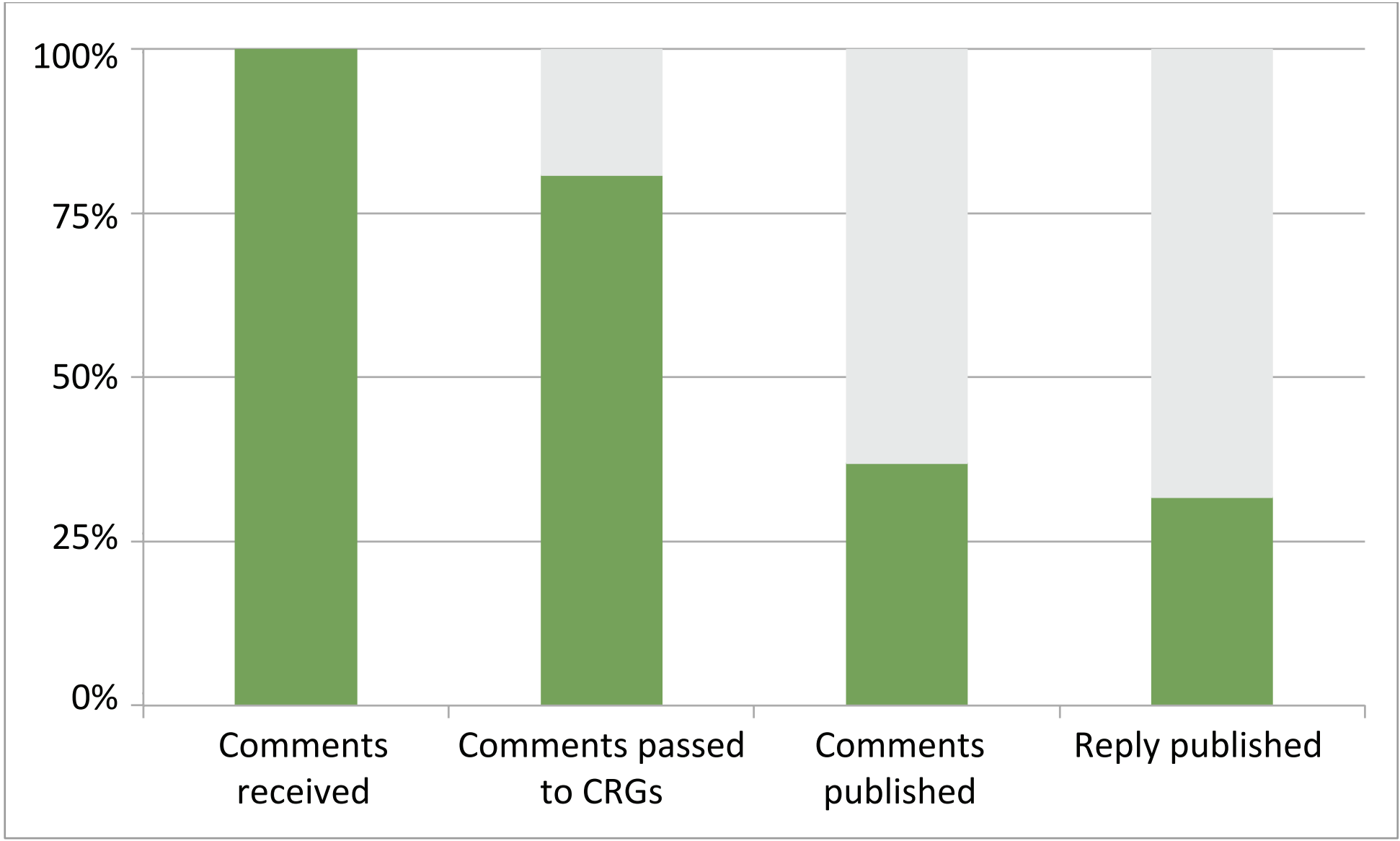


Figure 2: Proportions of comments received in 2013 that are passed to CRGs, published, and responded to

The majority of comments (54%) received by CRGs have not been published. The reasons for non-publication are shown in Figure 3.

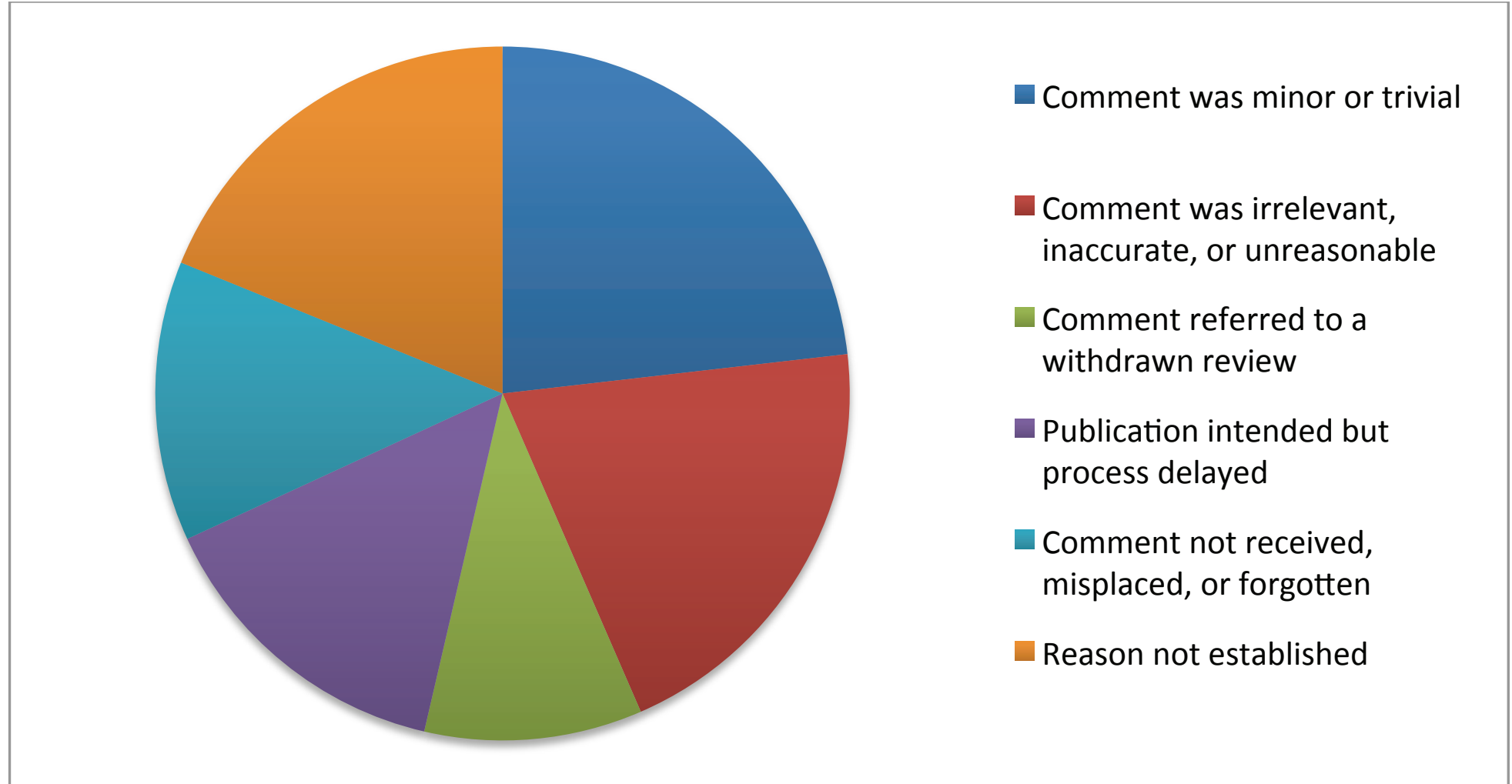


Figure 3: Reasons why received comments were not published

## How long does it take?

The elapsed time between comment submission and the appearance of the published comment on *The Cochrane Library* was an average of 78 days (range 3 to 244 days). The median was 65 days. In almost all cases where the review was amended as a result of the comment, the amendment was published at the same time as the comment and response.

## Do comments result in changes to the review?

Of the 59 published comments, 12 (20%) resulted in an amendment to the review and one (2%) resulted in an update, and in 17 cases (29%), a response from the authors or CRG indicated that the feedback had been addressed in an ongoing update or would be addressed when the review was next updated. Unpublished comments also prompted change, with five (7%) resulting in an amendment and nine (13%) being addressed at next update. Figure 4 shows the totals for all comments.

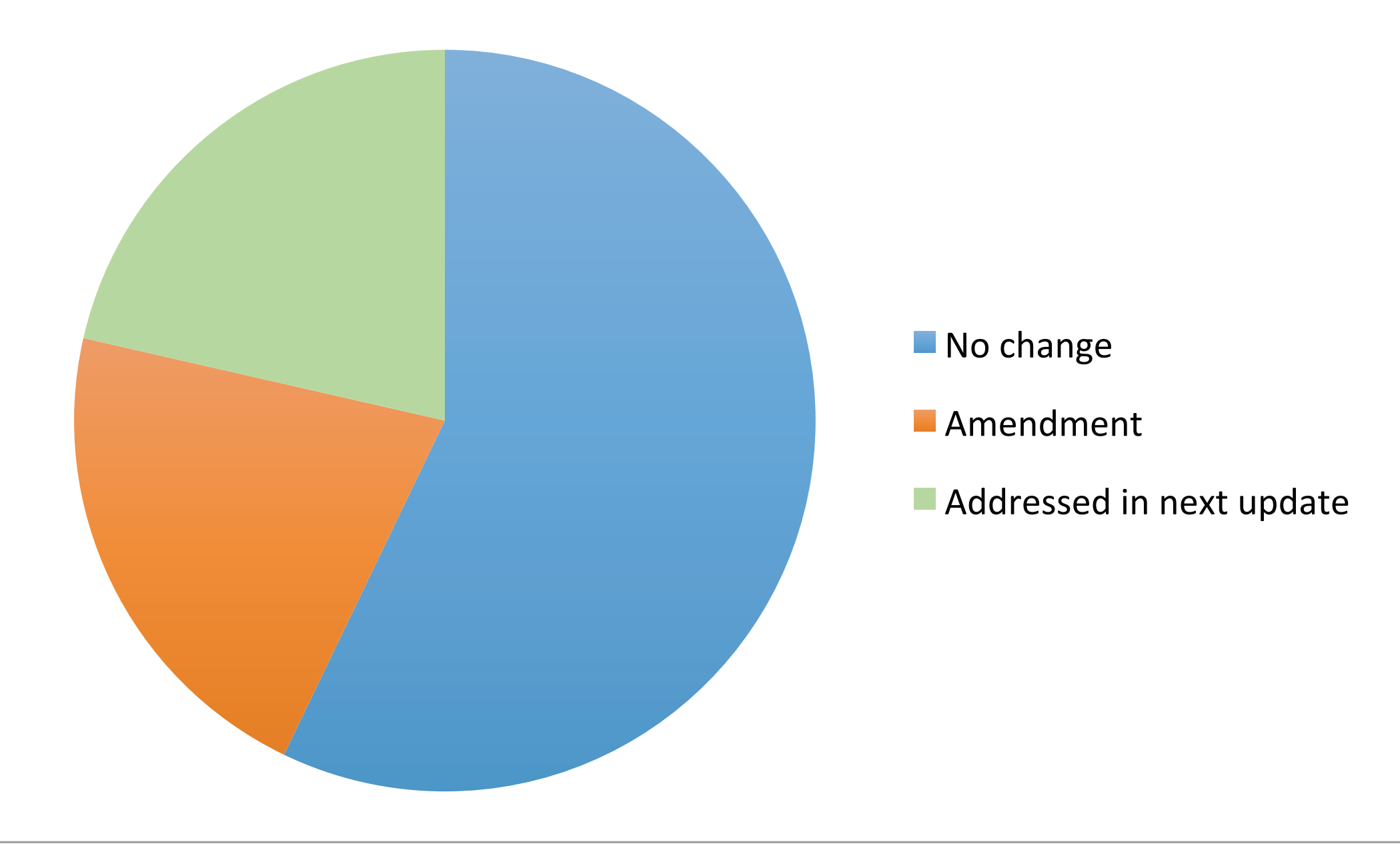


Figure 4: Impact of all comments on reviews

## Discussion

Readers of Cochrane Reviews and Protocols continue to use the comments system to participate in post-publication peer review. It is not clear why there was a large increase in comments submitted during 2013, but that trend does not seem to be continuing in 2014.

Given the number of published reviews and protocols available in the *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, the overall number of comments is low. This is consistent with journal commenting systems in general, which, with a few exceptions, are not widely used.[3] However, Cochrane's commitment to updating and amending reviews in light of new information means that a commenting system remains an important function.

The average of about 11 weeks from feedback submission to publication is an improvement on the 15 months observed in a previous analysis of feedback received prior to 2009.[4] The elapsed time was lower for comments published in the second half of the year, due to the introduction of Publish When Ready. However, there are still examples of long periods between submission and publication. This is partly explained by the editorial process for managing and publishing comments, which can necessitate several rounds of correspondence between the CRG editorial team, the review authors, and the comment contributor. In addition, some comments were exceptionally long or detailed, requiring a considerable investment of resources by the CRG.

The proportion of comments published is 46%, compared with 30% observed in 2009.[4] While most of the remainder were not published for good reasons, others were held up awaiting responses from authors or others, or were forgotten, misplaced or not received. In addition, many Managing Editors were unclear on the appropriate process to follow. This highlights the need to provide both updated guidance on feedback management and systems to make the process more efficient and transparent.

Comments do improve Cochrane Reviews. About one-third of the comments we looked at resulted in some kind of change to the review. Many other comments were published alongside a rebuttal or further commentary from the authors or the editorial team, giving readers an insight into the issues raised.

There are many ways in which Cochrane Review authors and editorial teams can receive feedback on Cochrane Reviews. *The Cochrane Library* commenting system continues to play a central role and would benefit from enhancements to improve the usability for feedback contributors, the visibility of comments, and the processes for management of comments.

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**Conflicts of interest:** JH & LJ are employees of The Cochrane Collaboration. GS & TA are employees of John Wiley & Sons. JC is an employee of the Cochrane Anaesthesia Group. JH & GS are responsible for feedback management for Cochrane and Wiley, respectively. No other conflicts declared.

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