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


1Editor, Cochrane Editorial Unit, Cochrane Central Executive, London, UK
2Associate Editor, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK
3Managing Editor, Cochrane Anaesthesia Group, Copenhagen, Denmark
4Office Assistant, Finance & Core Services Department, Cochrane Central Executive, London, UK
5Editorial Assistant, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, USA

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 aim of soliciting comments is to improve the quality of published reviews and to maintain engagement with users, but we need more information on the rate and impact of recently submitted comments to decide how we should best respond.

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 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 Comments may or may not be published as part of the review or protocol.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 checked 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 endeavored 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 was amended or updated in light of the comment.

How many comments are there?

During 2013, the Wiley platform processed 107 submitted comments, 120 of which (82%) were assessed by the editorial team and passed to CRGs. The remainder was an increase compared with 2012 and preceding years (Figure 1).

Which CRGs get the comments?

42 of the 107 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 138 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.

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 85 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. In 17 cases (29%), a response from the authors to 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 one (13%) being addressed at next update. Figure 4 shows the totals for all comments.

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 about 11 weeks from feedback submission to publication is an improvement on the 15 months observed in a previous audit of feedback received prior to 2010.[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 publishing comments, which can necessitate several rounds of correspondence between the CRG editorial team, the review authors, and the comment contributors. 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 2008.[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, requested or not received. In addition, many Managing Editors were uncertain 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 substantive or was fundamentally inaccurate, and we intend to contact CRGs to learn more about the reasons why.

There are many ways in which Cochrane Review authors and editors 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.

References


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

Corresponding author: John Hilton (jhilton@cochrane.org)