

REPORT TO THE GOVERNING BOARD  
ON THE ISSUES ARISING FROM THE EXPULSION OF PROFESSOR PETER GØTZSCHE

At the Annual General Meeting in Edinburgh in September 2018 the Cochrane Council announced that it would reflect on the events surrounding the Governing Board's decision to end Professor Peter Gøtzsche's membership of Cochrane, and his position as a Member of the Governing Board and as Director of the Nordic Cochrane Centre. To do so the Council felt it was necessary to consult as far as possible the various constituencies it represents. Whereas it would be normally expected that the members of the Council, as elected representatives, would be able to speak for them, it was felt that on this issue it was important to try to sample wider opinion. It must be noted that the responses received from the constituencies are likely to be subject to some degree of response bias. This report attempts to summarise the views and to advise the Board in the light of them.

First it is clear that there are diverging opinions both in the responses we received and also among Council members. It is therefore not possible to provide a unified perspective from the Council based on any consensus. Secondly it is also not possible to ascertain to what extent the various opinions from outside the Council are widely held or represent those of a minority who feel strongly and want to have their voices heard. It is also clear from some of the responses that these issues are still being seen largely as a challenge to academic freedom or related to the article co-authored by P. Gøtzsche criticising the HPV review. But the events have also re-awakened some long-standing concerns about the relationship between the Central Executive Team and other Cochrane entities and the distribution of resources committed to each.

There is clearly a body of support for the Governing Board and the actions that it took. This includes a number of the Council members and is seen in many of the responses from the various constituencies. One group specifically stated that 'the Board had undertaken their duty to resolve this situation in a way that was as fair and as transparent in terms of the AGM and subsequent reporting to the Cochrane Collaboration as could be expected given the legal constraints involved, and the need to protect personal privacy at the time'.

But there is widespread concern about the reputational damage that these events have caused and about the steps needed to remedy that. There is also a number of more critical responses with a few calling for the resignation of the current Governing Board and fresh elections or the immediate reinstatement of Peter Gøtzsche. The other critical comments group into several themes which can be summarised as:

- Concern about the validity and transparency of the internal process leading to the expulsion of Peter Gøtzsche with suggestions that there should now be an independent review
- The events show that Cochrane is an organisation that now appears intolerant of criticism
- The Board's actions were inconsistent with the values of a collaborative academic organisation
- Concern about the conflict of interest policy.

Although there were good response rates from some groups, such as the Centre Directors, Methods Executive and Coordinating Editors, the Council have only heard the views of a small proportion of the total membership they represent, and it is not possible to ascertain what the feelings of the majority are.

The Council is concerned for the wellbeing of Cochrane and its mission especially in light of the recent adverse publicity. The Council notes that the election process for new Governing Board members is under way and strongly advises the new Board to:

- reflect on the events and the apparent tensions that persist in the organisation that underlie some of the criticism and seek to remedy them
- review the terms of membership and the reasons for and mechanism of termination,
- define and communicate clearly the rights and responsibilities of being a Cochrane member.

Although the Council recognises that the ultimate decision-making about policy rests with the Board, as the body that represents the voice of the wider membership it would welcome opportunities to advise constructively in the aftermath of this very difficult period for Cochrane.

Miranda Langendam  
Fergus Macbeth  
Co-Chairs, Cochrane Council  
13 November 2018