

Unbiased health research reviews from the Cochrane Collaboration



Free access to 4500 medical research reviews for residents of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Poland, and doctors in Finland.

Everyone has a vested interest in biomedical research. Healthcare providers want to know the most effective and safe treatments for their patients. Clinical researchers need to review earlier studies before designing trials. Community members, who pay for medical research as taxpayers and drug consumers, want a good return on their investment. But sorting through the medical literature is difficult for doctors, scientists, and citizens.

Fortunately, at <http://www.cochrane.dk/>, residents of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Poland, and Sweden, and most doctors in Finland have free access to Cochrane Reviews; comprehensive, independent assessments of the medical evidence in areas from breast cancer screening to treating cold symptoms with zinc.

A FOUNDATION FOR ETHICAL RESEARCH

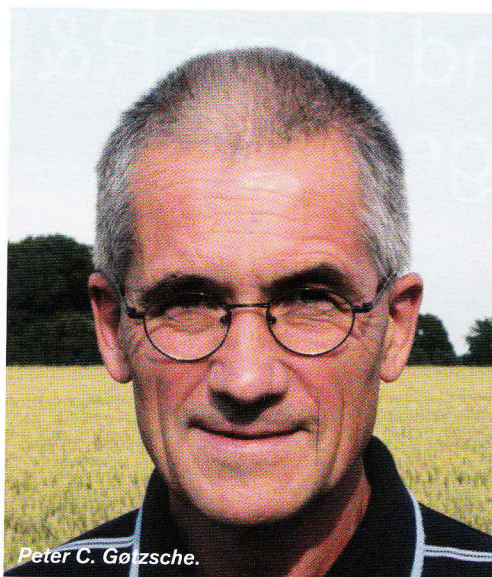
"Most people who use the reviews are health professionals who want to know what is available for a certain disease, and the harms and benefits of the treatments," says Dr. Peter C. Gøtzsche, Nordic Cochrane Centre director and University of Copenhagen professor, Institute of Surgery and Internal Medicine.

Scientists designing clinical trials also rely on the Cochrane Reviews. "The Helsinki Declaration says you need to do a thorough literature search before you do research on humans," says Gøtzsche. "If the research question has been addressed in previous trials, the experiment is superfluous and you can argue if it is unethical to recruit new patients for it." Cochrane Reviews provide a thorough literature analysis that researchers can extend by looking at trial results published since the review's latest update.

NAMED AFTER BRITISH EPIDEMIOLOGIST

The Nordic Cochrane Centre is housed at Copenhagen's Rigshospitalet, with branches

in Norway and Finland, and contacts in Iceland, Sweden, and Poland. The Centre's approximately 17 employees do software development for the entire Cochrane Collaboration, a network of 28,000 people in 100 countries, founded in the United Kingdom in 1993 and named after British epidemiologist Archie Cochrane (1909-1998), an advocate for critical evaluation of health research.



ONE OF THE FIRST ADDITIONAL CENTRES

Gøtzsche has been involved since the beginning, when Sir Iain Chalmers, founder of the UK Cochrane Centre, read Gøtzsche's thesis on bias in drug trials and suggested Denmark for one of the first additional Cochrane Centres, with Gøtzsche as leader. The Nordic Cochrane Centre believes that reliable information about health care interventions is a right, and access to the Cochrane Reviews is just part of fulfilling that principle.

The Centre also fights for transparency in health research. Last year, to obtain dependable information about drugs, they gained access to unpublished clinical trial reports and protocols from the European Medicines Agency. After initially running on grants

from governmental agencies and independent funders, Gøtzsche secured core funding from the Danish government in 2001 for both the Centre and the local groups that independently produce Cochrane Reviews.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS, ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

Denmark has Cochrane Review groups that specialize in anesthesia, colorectal cancer, and hepato-biliary disease; Finland has an occupational safety and health group, and Norway has an effective practice and organization of care group. Topics are often proposed by physicians, who search and scrutinize the literature, guided by the review groups and according to strict guidelines. "It's not the usual relationship between publisher and academic because we help the authors with how to do it," says Gøtzsche. Writing a review is not a weekend project. "We have a handbook of around 600 pages on how to do a Cochrane Review," he says.

An abstract and plain language summary makes it easy to get the take-home message of a Cochrane Review before diving into the clinical study comparisons. Providing both the big picture and the detailed analysis makes the reviews useful to physicians, researchers, and patients, fitting the egalitarian mission of the Cochrane Collaboration: "to help people make well-informed decisions about healthcare." ●