

The Cochrane Collaboration: Cochrane Oral Health Group



INFORMATION: CONSUMER PEER REVIEWING

▪ Consumer peer reviewing/consumer refereeing

Peer reviewing

Peer reviewing aims to ensure that Cochrane reviews and protocols are of the highest quality. Collaborative Review Groups send draft reviews and protocols (written descriptions of how the reviewer plans to carry out the review) to people with an interest in the subject, including consumers.

The authors of the review or protocol consider the suggestions they receive. Sometimes they will make changes. When the review is published it is open to public debate. Peer reviewers will be able to see how the review has changed during the editorial process and readers are welcome to comment.

Consumer peer reviewing

Consumers often serve as peer reviewers, and are usually called consumer referees or consumer peer reviewers. (This term is the subject of some debate.) When a consumer comments on a protocol or review they are bringing with them the perspective of a healthcare user. The questions they might ask include:

- Can I understand the language of the review and is it considerate to consumers?
- Do I know what the health problem is, and understand why the review is being done?
- Does it make sense for people with different backgrounds and from different parts of the world?
- Are the outcomes I and other consumers are concerned about being looked at?
- Has the reviewer considered potential harms as well as benefits?

The consumer referee therefore provides very valuable input into the editorial reviewing process.

▪ A guide to consumer peer reviewing

As a consumer you are bringing an important perspective to a Cochrane review. Don't let other people's perspectives overwhelm you - your role is to offer your particular expertise. Other reviewers will offer different areas of expertise, so that a comprehensive range of comments is contributed.

Before you start reviewing, you might find it helpful to think about what your contribution might be, and how you can develop your skills.

1. Think creatively

People who think creatively not only react to other people's ideas, but tap into their own experience (and that of their family, friends, colleagues). They are also informed by their personal reading. They visualise situations that are relevant to the topic and bring fresh ideas.

For example: When reading a review about neonatal care a consumer explained, "I picture the mother and baby, and apply what's written to her. Does it make sense? How does the intervention affect everything else that's happening?"

To build your own skills: Take every opportunity to extend your expertise as a consumer. Listen carefully to people talking about their experiences. Notice what they are talking about, and how

they are talking about it. Talk freely about it. When accepting health care for yourself or your family, notice how you react to situations.

When consumer peer reviewing: Try reading the title of the review first, then stop to think about it. What does the title mean to you? Do you understand the problem and its context from the background? Can you visualise people experiencing this problem? Where might they be? Who with? How might they be affected by the problem? What questions might they have? In what ways might people be different? What might you expect to happen, for better or for worse? What aspects of the experience might be particularly important to patients? How will this affect the patients' health in the future?

2. Use your own experience

People who know the topic well comment on research reports from a strong knowledge base. They can comment on health conditions, current practice and research questions. Some people are concerned that the more knowledgeable consumers become, the more like professionals they grow. However, consumers who become more knowledgeable but continue to be influenced by other consumers are able to challenge clinicians' and researchers' perspectives in greater detail. They also are never in the position of treating patients and making the ultimate decisions on health care.

For example, when reading a review of iron supplementation, a consumer with personal experience wrote "All the information is about the problems of anaemia (and the benefits of iron therapy) but nothing about the problems of iron therapy which I believe can be considerable..."

To build your own skills: continue to learn from consumers, patients, carers and lay writers and bring their views to bear when you are considering technical reports. Read popular media reports on your subject of interest as well as technical reports.

When consumer peer reviewing: Try bringing to mind what you already know about a topic, before thinking about how the reviewers have tackled the question they are addressing. What personal experience do you have? What have you heard from other consumers? Do you have books addressing this topic by consumers? What issues concern them? What terms do they use? What questions do they ask? What treatments might they be considering? What outcomes might they be hoping for?

3. Think about choice and ethics

People who apply consumerist principles bear in mind public protection and rights to information and choice. They can comment on choice and ethics.

For example, one consumer felt "... what is being said here is fine, but the way it is expressed implies that once the benefits and risks can be estimated with greater certainty then [patients'] choice should be removed."

To build your own skills: when reading newspaper editorials or listening to the news on the television or radio, compare how the stories are reported according to which service you are listening to or which newspaper you are reading. Notice how journalists and lawyers give very partial reports depending on whose perspective they are representing. In bringing a consumer perspective you need to be aware of your own principles and biases and to notice other people's principles and biases too.

When consumer peer reviewing: Every Cochrane review includes a conflict of interest statement pertaining to the authors. You may find other potential conflicts of interest such as sponsorship of the included trials or commercial interests in the products being tested. Are all potential conflicts of interest openly acknowledged? Do authors use emotive language?

4. Think logically

People who test the logic of a report do not necessarily share the same assumptions as the authors. Rather they may bring a fresh perspective and comment on the aims, rationale, flow of argument, bias and conclusions.

For example, one consumer wrote, "I did like the review and protocol which said what hypotheses they would be testing. This would have helped to focus the eventual analysis, but in the full review, the discussion did not return to the hypotheses! So, although the review was very interesting and educative, I would have benefited from... discussion in the same order as set out in the objectives. In fact, I think the information is there, but it is difficult to unpick."

To build your own skills: look for opportunities to exercise your logic. Does a film plot make sense? What does an advertisement actually claim (compared to what it wants you to believe)?

When peer reviewing: At first sight reviews may look puzzling. When you think you understand it, you could try rewriting the ideas in plain language, or drawing a diagram to illustrate the work done, or try to explain it to a friend. Does it still make sense?

5. Seek information

People who seek information ask personal questions as if they were patients or carers. For example, "consumers would like to know whether they will be in pain, is the surgery done under local/general anaesthetic, will they have to stay in hospital (if so, for how long?)". The information might be found in the list of outcomes, or in a detailed description of the intervention.

To build your own skills: When you read technical reports, get into the habit of putting yourself in the place of the patient. Would you know what to expect? What would you ask about? What might worry you? If this topic is new to you, do you have any pre-conceptions?

When consumer peer reviewing: When asking questions about health problems and their treatment, patients typically want to know: What would happen if nothing were done about it? What is the likely course, outcome, prognosis and danger? What options are there for treating the condition? All these issues could be considered in a review of effectiveness.

6. Check the clarity of the message

When looking at the clarity of the message people comment on the technical language, presentation, abbreviations, readability, understandability and illustrations (or lack of them) and make practical suggestions.

There has been some confusion about who the target audience is for Cochrane reviews, so the Cochrane Collaboration Steering Group has produced a policy statement:

Clear communication is essential. The target audience of Cochrane Reviews is people making decisions about health care. This includes healthcare professionals, consumers, policy makers with a basic understanding of the underlying disease or problem.

It is part of the mission and a basic principle of the Cochrane Collaboration to promote the accessibility of systematic reviews of the effects of healthcare interventions to anyone wanting to make a decision about health care. However, this does not mean that Cochrane Reviews must be understandable to anyone regardless of their background. This is not possible, any more than it would be possible for Cochrane Reviews to be written in a single language that is understandable to everyone in the world.

Cochrane Reviews should be written so that they are easy to understand by someone with a basic sense of the topic who may not necessarily be an expert in the area. Some explanation of terms and concepts are likely to be helpful, and perhaps essential. However, too much explanation can detract from the readability of a review. Simplicity and clarity are also vital to readability. The readability of Cochrane Reviews should be comparable to that of a well-written article in a general medical journal.

Consumer reviewers can highlight those terms, which clinicians would need to explain to patients during a consultation, and suggest lay alternatives if possible, which can be incorporated into the text of the review and into a glossary of terms.

For example: A consumer may ask, "How well does the review explain the words and scientific terms it uses? I thought they worked hard to explain terms, but scientific terms crept in which could

have done with a mini dictionary somewhere in the text. So in [the review] which was admirably explained for the most part, words such as 'papular', 'vesicular', 'coagulase-positive' crept in unexplained... I have suggested that review groups should develop and maintain a common dictionary as a resource so their reviewers are not constantly having to re-define meanings".

To build your own skills: you can get into the habit of using technical and lay language interchangeably. This is particularly helpful when discussing health care in a mixed group where some terms may not be familiar to everyone, or may have different meanings for different people. For instance, 'informed consent' and 'informed choice' tend to be used by different groups of people who visualise completely different scenarios. If other people use phrases you tend not to use yourself, explore the different meanings they may have and the assumptions behind them.

When consumer peer reviewing: Are there words which need explaining? Are sentences long and unwieldy? Can you work out the likelihood of a patient benefiting or suffering from the intervention being tested? Mark technical words and phrases, which could be usefully included in the glossary and offer lay translation, if you can think of one. Pay particular attention to the abstract because this is most widely available and most widely read.

Suggest plain, non-technical wording to help consumers and to help clinicians explain evidence to patients. Even if you can't suggest an improvement, it is still helpful to highlight sections, which are difficult to read or understand.

7. Encourage the authors

People who encourage others highlight valuable aspects of a review or protocol, make practical suggestions for change and explain the value of possible improvements. Review authors have worked hard to prepare a draft protocol or review, and they have had to be brave to let their work out for comment for the first time. No one expects their work to be received without suggestions for improvement, but criticism is easier to accept if it is accompanied by an appreciation of the better points of a piece of work.

For example: "This is a good, well-written protocol. It's easy to understand, concise and to the point."

To build your own skills: you can get into the habit of noticing and commenting on the positive aspects of any experience, as well as the disappointments.

When consumer peer reviewing: What can you find in the authors' work which pleases you? The explanation of the problem, or choice of outcomes? The language used? Or a particular turn of phrase?

Give positive feedback first, give it as often as often as possible, and give it even if you have been asked to fill in a standard checklist which doesn't request positive feedback.

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