

EDITORIAL

# When trial authors write Cochrane Reviews: competing interests need to be better managed

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Authors of Cochrane Reviews are also sometimes authors of trials eligible for inclusion in the Cochrane Review. This dual authorship is clearly a competing interest. This editorial unpacks the dilemma of dual authorship, examines the extent of the problem with existing reviews, and comments on the current Cochrane editorial policy on dual authorship and its implementation.

Cochrane systematic reviews aspire to be top-quality evidence, based on rigorous methodological standards. However, competing interests threaten independence of any research endeavour. Non-financial competing interests are common in medicine.<sup>[1]</sup> For Cochrane, this is a particular problem: specialists are more likely to instigate or participate in a Cochrane Review in their area of expertise, and they have a fund of knowledge to help make the review informative. However, these authors are probably enthusiasts for the intervention, or have strong views about it, and they may also be authors of trials eligible for inclusion in that review. These factors introduce substantial risks that these authors may bias the results, as they are not independent. Dual authors may unintentionally bend inclusion criteria, quality assessment, and interpretation of the results and conclusions of trials they have done, or of trials done by others in the field that they have views about.

What is more, readers will perceive a risk of bias when there are competing interests. For example, an article in the *BMJ* raised the question as to whether a Cochrane review was a truly reliable, independent assessment of the evidence as its author was also the author of the main included trial, even though the author had declared this dual authorship.<sup>[2][3]</sup> Getting these rules straight for new reviews and for review updates is important not only for the science, but also for Cochrane's reputation, including both the true and perceived validity of the review.

For over ten years, Cochrane's editorial policy has been to have more than one author on a review and that when an author of a trial is also an author on the review this is declared to the editorial team through the conflicts of interest form. Furthermore, the assessment of eligibility and risk of bias should be independently assessed by a second author not involved in the studies. New guidance, issued in May 2014, goes a bit further, stating that dual authors must:<sup>[4]</sup>

- Publish the competing interest in the “declaration of interests” section of the Cochrane review

- Not “extract data from their own study or studies”.

This latter statement implies that editors need to ensure this happens and to provide authors with advice on how to arrange this.

We examined the degree to which Cochrane Review Groups ensure this competing interest is managed in line with the Cochrane guidelines at that time. We audited all new Cochrane Reviews published from September 2013 to March 2014. We checked whether each author of each review was also an author of one of the included trials. We then examined if the competing interest was published (checking both the methods section and the declaration of interests) and what steps had been taken to mitigate the risk of the competing interest influencing the results.

A total of 197 reviews were included, and 14% (28/197) of reviews had one or more authors who were also authors on trials of included studies. Of these 28 reviews, 68% (19/28) recorded the competing interest in the methods section or as one of the declarations of potential conflicts of interest. Eighty-two percent (23/28) comply with the Cochrane guidance at the time, in that eligibility and risk of bias were independently assessed by a second author not involved in the studies. However, in eight studies, the dual author was one of the two people extracting data. This means only 53% (15/28) of recent reviews will actually fully comply with the most recently issued Cochrane guidance.

This new guidance moves us in the right direction. However, we are surprised the guidance does not mention deciding which studies should be included, an absolutely critical step, requiring careful, independent evaluation. We suggest that the policy should also specify that dual authors should not apply inclusion criteria. We believe Cochrane Review Groups need to rapidly adopt the recent policy. First, they can ensure the declaration of interest is completed. Second, they can start implementing and documenting the independent data extraction, although there may be pragmatic lag period for author teams in the final stages of completing their review. With prompt action we can correct this chink in our methodological armour.

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### Declarations of interest

The authors have completed the Unified Competing Interest form at [www.icmje.org/coi\\_disclosure.pdf](http://www.icmje.org/coi_disclosure.pdf) (available upon request) and declare that they have no competing interests.

### Provenance and peer review

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