

# Submission to the McKeon Review from the Cochrane Collaboration in Australia

## Summary

Rigorous and up to date syntheses of research findings in the form of systematic reviews are essential to underpin and inform health policy, practice and research. The value of systematic reviews is widely recognised within the health system but there is insufficient resource and capacity to meet the demand. Producing, disseminating and translating systematic reviews require specialised expertise. Proper investment in supporting this expertise and facilitating systematic review production has the potential to improve health service delivery, quality of care and optimise research funding. This submission is from the leaders of funded Cochrane Collaboration groups based in Australia and includes discussion of:

- The need for reliable, relevant research and research syntheses to underpin practice and policy decisions;
- Regional responsibility for leadership in research synthesis and making a global contribution;
- Funding mechanisms for national research resources, ensuring we do not lose hard won capacity through inadequate long term funding;
- Evidence informed research funding: making funding decisions based on what has gone before;
- Setting priorities for research;
- The need for methods research around how to best conduct, report, synthesise and translate research; and
- Regularly updated systematic reviews as the most reliable basis for knowledge translation into practice and policy.

## Background

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international not-for-profit organisation which aims to help people make well-informed decisions about health care by preparing, maintaining and promoting the accessibility of systematic reviews of the effects of healthcare interventions ([www.cochrane.org](http://www.cochrane.org)). Australia has a proud history of contributing to the Cochrane Collaboration, dating back to the beginning of the Cochrane Collaboration 20 years ago. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) currently supports Australian-based Cochrane activity through infrastructure funding to a number of Cochrane Collaboration groups; and funds a national subscription to *The Cochrane Library*, allowing all Australians direct access to in excess of 5000 Cochrane systematic reviews.

The work of producing, disseminating and translating reliable, research-based healthcare information is essential and highly valued by consumers, practitioners and policy makers. However the current level of funding is insufficient to allow this activity to continue and as a result, Australia's contribution to this global research collaboration is severely threatened. This submission explores some underlying issues and offers solutions as they relate to the Terms of Reference. The submission is from the leaders of funded Cochrane Collaboration groups based in Australia.

## 1. Why is it in Australia's interest to have a viable, internationally competitive health and medical research sector?

### Reliable, relevant research and research syntheses to underpin practice and policy

*Health work teaches us with great rigour that action without knowledge is wasted effort, just as knowledge without action is wasted resource'* (LEE Jong-wook, past WHO Director General). Systematic reviews which identify, appraise and synthesise the results of research are the most efficient, reliable form of knowledge to inform action in healthcare practice and policy. Basing healthcare decisions on evidence from research syntheses has the greatest potential to ensure safe and effective health care and to inform resource allocation. In addition, reviews of evidence enable clinicians and policy makers to withstand selective lobbying and provide checks and balance into the decision making process.

In Australia, important policy decisions are made using systematic reviews. Examples include the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee, Medicare Services Advisory Committee, NHMRC Clinical and Public Health Guidelines, the National Prescribing Service, Australian National Preventive Health Agency, Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, and Medical Colleges. In addition, the NHMRC health advisory committees, State and Federal governments make planning decisions about public health prevention, screening and surveillance programs, as well as the content of programs using evidence summaries, based on Cochrane reviews. However there is much duplication of effort in this process. Cochrane reviews are independent, rigorous and available globally. Appropriate support of Cochrane groups within Australia will reduce the waste of duplicating reviews, and bring efficiencies to the process through a workforce with capacity to conduct and lever reliable evidence syntheses. We need to ensure we have the capacity as a country to prioritise and conduct reviews of the evidence to inform key national decisions. Cochrane entities play a vital role in training, mentoring and supporting a large cadre of researchers, clinicians, consumers and policy makers in Australia to understand, use and participate in systematic review research.

### Regional responsibility and making a global contribution

Australia is a high income country with capacity to undertake substantial research. In the same way that we maintain our *research* leadership role in our region, so should we do the same for *research synthesis*, addressing the important healthcare questions for Australia and the Asia-Pacific. Australasian Cochrane groups provide training and support for authors and users of Cochrane systematic reviews not only in Australia, but throughout South East Asia and the Pacific.

The Cochrane Collaboration provides an excellent model for global collaboration towards shared research output, and it is essential that Australia maintains and develops its contribution. With today's healthcare and policy questions increasingly requiring interdisciplinary input, the Cochrane Collaboration has embraced new and emerging technologies that make it easier for individuals across the globe to work together to produce reviews that reflect an international body of evidence.

## **2. How might health and medical research be best managed and funded in Australia?**

### **Funding mechanisms for national research resources**

While competitive processes for funding investigator-driven and priority research are essential, Australia needs improved mechanisms for adequate and sustained funding of national research resources, such as trial registration capability, data repositories, and *The Cochrane Library*. These resources do not fit into the current structures of research funding schemes and hence are constantly at risk of short term project funding models. For a country that has significant research capacity, it is surprising and potentially wasteful that national resources and national endeavours, such as Australia's contribution to the Cochrane Collaboration, are vulnerable to the vagaries of uncertain and inadequate long term funding.

### **Evidence informed research funding: making funding decisions based on what has gone before**

Resources to support research are too scarce to fund trials investigating questions to which we already know the answer. In addition, we have a responsibility to ensure studies involving human participants are needed and ultimately useful to practice and policy. It is the obligation of research funders to ensure that any new research should add to and not duplicate existing research. This can only happen if proposals are underpinned by systematic reviews of what is already known.

## **3. What are the health and medical research strategic directions and priorities and how might we meet them?**

### **Setting priorities for research**

Research investment should be guided by a clear understanding of the important questions for clinicians, policy makers, program designers and consumers. The Cochrane Collaboration has undertaken a number of priority setting exercises to guide the conduct and content of our reviews. Structured dialogues that address health priorities facilitate partnerships between practitioners, policy makers and consumers and are increasingly used by Cochrane groups to prioritise reviews. This provides a strong opportunity to support funding for research questions of relevance to local conditions and contexts.

## **4. How can we optimise translation of health and medical research into better health and wellbeing?**

### **Need for methods research around how to best conduct, report, synthesise and translate research**

Australia's research priorities should include furthering our understanding of, and building capacity for, translating research into practice and facilitating evidence-informed policy. To this end we need investment in research which develops and tests methods of synthesising, communicating and implementing research-based clinical recommendations and public health policy. This will require new and sustained investment in the development of networks and forums to bring researchers together with those making healthcare decisions.

### **Translating 'bodies of knowledge': systematic reviews as the basis for knowledge for translation**

Science is cumulative; for healthcare decisions to be based on the totality of available reliable research, it is essential that bodies of knowledge are translated and not the results of single studies.

Regularly updated systematic reviews form the most reliable basis for knowledge translation into practice and policy. Hence, investment in the preparation and implementation of systematic reviews has the greatest potential to ensure we are optimising health and well being through focussed effort on the translation of reliable and relevant research synthesis.

Cochrane reviews are the most methodologically rigorous of systematic reviews. More than 5000 are included in *The Cochrane Library* which is considered an essential resource for informing clinical and policy decisions, and for informing research agendas and funding.

Per head of population, Australians are the highest users of *The Cochrane Library*. Investment in systematic reviews and Australian based Cochrane Collaboration activity is essential if we are to maintain our contribution and ensure knowledge translation is directed to translating reliable knowledge.

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