



Cochrane has not consistently followed the COPE guidelines

There have been concerns about the procedures and policies of the Cochrane organization.¹⁻⁴ Here I describe one case where Cochrane procedures seemed inconsistent with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines.^{5,6}

In 2009, I found that there were a number of errors in the Cochrane review of “vitamin C supplementation for asthma”.⁷ For example, there were errors in the data extraction; one trial had 20 participants, but only 11 participants were included in the analysis. There were errors in calculations, and the unpaired t test was used when the paired test should have been used. I wrote a feedback which was published in the 2010 version of the review.⁸

The managing editor, Emma Welsh, wrote a response in 2012.⁹ Simultaneously, the three analysis figures, which had been the focus of my critique, were removed.⁹ In their absence, however, my feedback though originally valid became irrelevant. Furthermore, the remaining figures were renumbered so that the figure numbers in my feedback indicated real but subsequently changed figures; therefore, readers would be completely confused. Finally, many responses by Welsh did not seem valid.¹⁰

Analysis figures are the scientific core of Cochrane reviews, and their removal after publication seemed inappropriate. When I found the figure removal, I contacted Cochrane. As a solution to the problem, the editor-in-chief, David Tovey, proposed that: “I would like to propose that we add a link to the publisher's note that links people to the version on your website, if, as I expect, I cannot insert a version of the review into the system” (email Tovey 10 June 2016 to Hemilä).

I responded by email to the effect that to add such a link to the publishers note to my website was inconsistent with COPE objectives regarding the integrity of the academic record. One issue being that having a link to my website would not be sufficient to guarantee a permanent record as websites of and maintained by individuals are not permanent in the long run. Furthermore, I saw it as the responsibility of the publisher, not the contributors, to maintain such academic records (email Hemilä 15 June 2016 to Tovey).

Thereafter, David Tovey proposed that the original publication might be available by email from the Cochrane editors upon request: “we could revise the withdrawn statement as follows: ... Revised statement: ... it is not possible to access the

original 2010 version in the review's history in the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. Readers should contact the Cochrane Editorial Unit (ceu@cochrane.org) to request a copy of the original version of the review, without the Editors' changes” (email Tovey 11 March 2017 to Hemilä).

I replied to the above proposal to the effect that to do so was impracticable because a) it put the onus on the reader to write a request to the editors for a copy, b) such a document cannot be used as a reference in future publications, and c) the file itself could be easily lost, especially when future editors take office. Thus, in my opinion, the integrity of the academic record was still compromised (email Hemilä 14 March 2017 to Tovey).

That correspondence took a year and made no further progress, so I contacted COPE. I stated that the removal of the three figures seemed inconsistent with the guidelines to secure the integrity of academic record even in the case of flawed publications.⁵ COPE stated that the original version needs to be made available and a version with all the original figures was made public in 2018.⁷

Because of the above actions, one single PubMed record (#19160185)¹¹ links to two different versions of the same Cochrane review. The PubMedCentral (2009) version includes all the original figures, but not my feedback.⁷ The Cochrane Library (2012) version includes my feedback, but does not include the three analysis figures to which my feedback focuses.⁹ Finally, a third version (2010) has both the original figures and my feedback, and is available at the University of Helsinki Digital Archive.⁸

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest.

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