



The Cochrane board votes to expel Peter Gøtzsche

The decision has prompted others to step down in protest, threatening the stability of the board altogether. Talha Burki reports.

An extraordinary row has broken out at Cochrane, after the governing board voted to expel Peter Gøtzsche, director of the Nordic Cochrane Centre.

The dispute dominated proceedings at the Cochrane annual general meeting in Edinburgh on Sept 17. Four members of the governing board have quit. A statement on the Cochrane website, dated the same day as the annual general meeting, initially claimed that these individuals have “actively disseminated an incomplete and misleading account of events”.

Gøtzsche, who is appealing his expulsion, has responded that Cochrane is in a “moral governance crisis”.

The situation as it stands

It is a complicated story. According to the statement on the Cochrane website, which is, thus far, the institution’s only comment on the situation, “this is about the behaviour of one individual...It is about a long-term pattern of behaviour that we say is totally, and utterly, at variance with the principles and governance of the Cochrane Collaboration. This is about integrity, accountability and leadership.”

Others speculate that the leadership have long been looking for a pretext to move against Gøtzsche.

The Cochrane statement, which formed the basis of an address to the annual general meeting by co-chair of the board Martin Burton, does not name Gøtzsche, though he is identifiable as the individual in question. It asserts that “all our staff, and our members, have the right to do their work without harassment and personal attacks. We are living in a world where behaviours that cause pain and misery to people, are being ‘called out’. This Board wants to be clear that while we are Trustees of

this organization, we will have a ‘zero tolerance’ policy for repeated, seriously bad behaviour. There is a critical need for ALL organizations to look after their staff and members; once repeated, seriously bad behaviour had been recognized, doing nothing was NOT an option.”

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The remarks are signed by the governing board. Pending the outcome of his appeal, Gøtzsche contends that he remains a member of the board; as *The Lancet* went to press, he was listed as such on the Cochrane website.

“They have put me down as an author of a document that defames me and that I had no knowledge of before it went online”, said Gøtzsche. “That is misconduct; a speech was read about me with all kinds of unpleasant insinuations, and they invent all this stuff about bad behaviour without saying what they mean or what this bad behaviour was supposed to be.” He added that several people have inferred that he has been accused of some kind of criminal offence, including sexual harassment. “Nothing could be further from the truth, of course”, said Gøtzsche.

Gøtzsche is a founding member of Cochrane. He established the Nordic Cochrane Centre in 1993. He was elected to the Cochrane governing board in 2017. He has a reputation for being outspoken and has certainly been vocal in his criticism of Cochrane.

Gøtzsche thinks that the collabo-

ration is becoming increasingly centralised and commercialised, that the executive team has authoritarian tendencies, and that certain policies are not fit for purpose.

“1 year ago, I pointed out to a meeting of the governing board that it was totally unacceptable that up to half of the authors on a Cochrane paper can have direct financial conflicts of interest with those companies whose products they are reviewing”, he told *The Lancet*. “I wrote a new draft of the policy, but absolutely no meaningful action has been taken”.

In 2013, Gøtzsche published “Deadly Medicines and Organised Crime: How Big Pharma Has Corrupted Healthcare”. He is a long-standing critic of the pharmaceutical industry. He believes that Cochrane is vulnerable to pressure from the industry, and that his dismissal was partly driven by a desire to silence him. Cochrane denies this.

“This Board decision is not about freedom of speech. It is not about scientific debate. It is not about tolerance of dissent. It is not about someone being unable to criticize a Cochrane Review”, notes the statement on the website.



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A motion to expel

The motion to expel Gøtzsche was proposed at a board meeting on Sept 13. At the time, the board consisted of 13 members. Six voted in favour, five were opposed, and one member abstained (Gøtzsche was not present at the vote).

The decision prompted four board members to step down. They released a statement explaining that they felt the expulsion was disproportionate. "We believe that the expulsion of inconvenient members from the Collaboration goes against Cochrane ethos and neither reflects its founding spirit nor promotes the Collaboration's best interests", they wrote.

The Cochrane statement suggests that the decision to expel Gøtzsche hinged on three key issues. The first was the findings of an independent legal review into complaints made against Gøtzsche and "serious allegations against one of the Senior Management Team" made by "the individual", presumably Gøtzsche. The Cochrane statement does not specify the nature of the complaints, but insiders have confirmed that they relate to matters of policy and not anything criminal or illegal. Documents uploaded to Goetzsche's personal website suggest that the complaints against him relate to his alleged violations of the Cochrane spokesperson policy. Cochrane asserts that "the report completely exonerated the member of the Senior Management Team but did not exonerate the other individual".

"This is utterly false", responds Gøtzsche. "The legal counsel cleared me of the complaints that were raised against me—to suggest otherwise is to completely misrepresent the findings of the review".

The second issue was a paper co-authored by Gøtzsche and published on July 27, in *BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine* (*BMJ EBM*).

The paper claimed that the Cochrane HPV vaccine review missed 20 trials and ignored important evidence of bias. In response, David Tovey,

Cochrane's editor-in-chief, wrote that Gøtzsche and his co-authors had made "allegations that are not warranted and provided an inaccurate and sensationalised report of their analysis". The Sept 17 statement by Cochrane noted that "the publication of the [*BMJ EBM*] paper has proved controversial. As a result, the Board received a number of letters of complaint."

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The independent legal review was already under way when the paper appeared. But a well placed insider told *The Lancet* that its publication aggravated an already fractious situation.

"People thought 'this is just another step to offend everyone in Cochrane'", he said. "Nobody knew that this paper was coming and the authors chose not to raise their concerns about the vaccine review through the official channels."

Gøtzsche said that the lack of notification was an innocent oversight and that the official channels move much too slowly to be effective.

The final issue was described in the Cochrane statement as "a broad range of behaviours", further details of which have not been released.

The vote to expel Gøtzsche came under a formal provision to address those "guilty of conduct which has had or is likely to have a serious adverse effect on the Charity or bring the Charity or any or all of the members or Directors into disrepute". Gøtzsche describes the board meeting as something akin to a show trial.

What this means for the stability of the board

Gerald Gartlehner, director of Cochrane Austria, was one of the four board

members who resigned after the vote. "The expulsion of Peter was disproportionate and it was foreseeable that this decision and how it occurred would cause a serious crisis for the collaboration", he explained. "We, as board members, would have had to publicly stand by the decision and I could not have done so in good conscience."

He stressed that his resignation was entirely related to the process. "This is not about defending behaviour or endorsing Peter's scientific opinions", said Gartlehner.

"Cochrane has always stood for diversity and plurality of opinions and Peter has contributed a lot; if we are to remain a strong organisation, we must find more transparent and measured ways to deal with internal conflicts", he said.

An individual with knowledge of the events in Edinburgh points out that examples were not given of the bad behaviour that Gøtzsche is alleged to have been responsible for. "There was a total lack of transparency at the annual general meeting; no one knew what was going on", they said.

Cochrane declined *The Lancet's* repeated requests for an interview.

In order to maintain the requisite balance between appointed and elected members of the Cochrane governing board, two additional members stepped down after the four resignations.

The reconstituted board was scheduled to meet as *The Lancet* went to press, when Gøtzsche's appeal will presumably be decided. Cochrane says that it will be in a position to make more information available after this meeting.

Some people are beginning to question whether the board can survive. "I think we need a fresh start", said one insider. "This whole thing has done a lot of damage to Cochrane; the only way to regain trust will be to replace the entire management board."

Talha Burki