

Proposed New Cochrane Public Health Review Group (PHRG) Frequently Asked Questions September 2007

What definition of public health will the PHRG be using?

The topic scope of the PHRG will be included in the Group's module on The Cochrane Library. Visit www.ph.cochrane.org for a draft of the scope for comment

Should PH Cochrane reviews include study designs outside RCTs?

We recognize that not all public health interventions are appropriate to randomised controlled trials or to traditional Cochrane reviews. Misunderstandings that Cochrane reviews only include RCTs may have discouraged the involvement of some health promotion and public health researchers in the Cochrane Collaboration. However, we believe that the methodology of a systematic review is appropriate to many public health interventions and that in these cases we should strive for the most comprehensive review of the available evidence as possible. At present, where reviewers have provided some justification or rationale for deciding which design(s) to include based on their specific review question, the following study designs will be accepted within a Cochrane systematic review: RCTs, quasi-RCTs, Cluster RCTs, Controlled before and after studies, and Interrupted Time Series. Our Review Group will strive to ensure the content and process of a Cochrane review is reflective of the principles of health promotion and public health and contains information that is applicable and reflects the needs of public health practitioners and decision makers.

Should PH be a review group in Cochrane?

As a Health Promotion and Public Health Field of the Cochrane Collaboration, we used various approaches to promote and improve the quality and quantity of public health reviews across the Collaboration. However, without direct influence over the editorial pathway of a public health review, there is a limitation to what can be achieved. In order to better achieve these outcomes the formation of a dedicated editorial group of public health experts with systematic review experience has been proposed. The plan is for this group to receive and guide complex upstream public health titles through the Cochrane review process.

Cochrane reviews are considered high quality evidence and are powerful tools for guiding decision making. This is because systematic reviews produced by Cochrane Collaborative Review Groups are a result of exhaustive searches of all relevant studies (including unpublished); scrutinized for relevance and quality, and analysed to draw conclusions about how the net result could be applied in practice. The highly structured end reports are transparent in their methodology and there is a commitment to regularly update the reviews, incorporating new studies as they are completed. We believe that public health

interventions should be scrutinized for their effectiveness at the highest level possible to help guide policy and practice decisions. The PHRG is committed to exploring review methodologies to ensure flexibility and appropriateness to the needs and contexts of PH research, policy and practice.

How will qualitative research be considered?

Qualitative research plays an important role in adding context to the ‘why’ an intervention works or doesn’t work as intended, and is invaluable in identifying changes to interventions to increase effectiveness and appropriateness. Given this, it is encouraging that qualitative components are increasingly being built into RCTs of health interventions, as well as other study designs. Qualitative studies are not currently included in the analysis component of Cochrane reviews but can be used to provide background information to the intervention for review and/or to help make sense of, or put into context, the findings of the review. Information from qualitative studies can also help to formulate specific review questions and inform the reviewers of what outcomes they should be focusing on.

The PHRG will continue to work with the Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group (www.joannabriggs.edu.au/cqrmg/index.html) in their development of approaches suitable for systematically reviewing qualitative evidence and the training of reviewers in qualitative meta-synthesis.

How will the PHRG ensure international representation?

We will continue to actively recruit membership from all parts of the world, particularly through existing public health networks such as national public health associations, schools of public health and other professional contact lists. We will ensure a wide range of roles are offered to those wishing to be involved in the Group, including translating, topic identification, authoring, peer reviewing reviews and membership on specific review advisory groups to represent the needs of end users.

Examples of strategies that may be adopted:

- Targeting students, post doctoral fellows, trainees, colleagues in public health departments
- Referrals, word of mouth recommendations from editorial team and other review authors
- Disseminating diverse and culturally appropriate, translated information about the CRG (brochures, newsletters, recruiting local reps to present at annual conferences or meetings in countries outside of the administrative base, presentations, workshops, putting translated information about CRG in meeting packs and exhibition stands)
- Seeking grants for review authors
- Publishing articles in journals relevant to public health
- Recruiting review authors from authors in existing literature

- Editors recruiting in their own topic areas
- Running evidence based practice workshops in appropriate settings
- Working with Cochrane Centres

How will the PHRG consider developing countries?

The PHRG will seek to recruit an editor, and authors, peer reviewers and topic advisory group members from developing countries to contribute reviews of relevance to them. Several strategies will be adopted to do this including, but not limited to:

- Undertaking targeted outreach activities (e.g. helping to instigate and organise Evidence Based Practice training in a developing country)
- Choosing a specific country each year with whom to establish links as well as further developing existing links and partnerships
- Contacting Cochrane Centres who work with developing countries as part of a targeted recruitment strategy

The PHRG is working closely with the Cochrane Developing Countries Network to identify strategies to encourage and make Cochrane participation easier for people in developing countries. The Group is currently involved in the Cochrane funded project, *Prioritizing Cochrane review topics to reduce the know-do gap in low and middle income countries*, in partnership with the Cochrane Health Equity Field, Cochrane Developing Countries Network, and the Norwegian Satellite of the Cochrane Effective Practice and Organization of Care Group. This will help to identify public health topics of relevance to LMIC countries and will be promoted and supported as priority topics for review by our Group.

How will you respond to method development?

As methods for complex reviews are innovative and challenging the PHRG will establish a methods working group. This group will undertake research to explore methodological developments and oversee the continued development of the Guidelines for Conducting Reviews of HPPH interventions. They will also ensure that the group remains aware of new methodological developments being explored by other experts. The PHRG methods group will work closely with existing Cochrane methods groups including the Non-Randomised Studies Methods Group, the Qualitative Methods Group, and the Cochrane-Campbell Economics Methods Group. In addition, the group will work with other groups focusing on systematic review methods including the National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools in Canada, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence in the UK, the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre in the UK and the Centres for Disease Control in the USA.

How will topics be determined?

The Cochrane Collaboration has traditionally worked on a researcher-driven topic agenda. However, our Group has strongly advocated for a larger focus on review topics that have

been largely determined by potential users, to ensure Cochrane reviews reflect the evidence needs of decision makers and practitioners. This commitment to prioritising reviews has now been adopted to a greater or lesser extent throughout the Collaboration as a whole. The PHRG will seek suggestions for public health topics via its website, biannual newsletter and through other public forums (such as public health discussion lists). The Group may also periodically convene a working group or taskforce of appropriate representatives to determine review topics that will be prioritized for review completion. Potential authors wishing to undertake a topic (whether driven by their own research interests or as directed by another source) will be asked for a rationale for why the topic is important and requiring a review in the Title Registration Form, as is the practice of other CRGs.

Are there funds available for conducting reviews?

Many researchers interested in assessing the effects of health care interventions will view systematic reviews as part of their work and consequently have time allocated as part of their paid employment. When it is not, grants and other awards made to Cochrane Review Groups and authors are likely to help the process to proceed more quickly and efficiently. The PHRG will provide letters of support where researchers are applying for funding to undertaking Cochrane reviews of a public health intervention. Funding for a short period (for example, seven days, possibly spread over three months) devoted entirely to the review, is invaluable. Such time is often best spent at the editorial base where advice and support should be freely available and the PHRG will endeavor to provide such opportunities at a time that suits an author. A number of possible funding sources for review support are emerging (such as through Cochrane Fields and Networks) and these will be posted on our website as they become available.

What is the role of PHRG in informing primary research?

Cochrane reviews identifying a limited number or non-existence of good quality studies evaluating the effectiveness of a public health intervention can be a powerful tool for advocating for research funding. They can also highlight, for example, what current studies are missing in terms of the outcomes they are measuring (such as reporting of adverse outcomes and quality of life indicators), the amount of detail included in research reporting and what is required to be included in future research (such as longer follow-up duration). The *Implications for Research* section of a Cochrane review is an opportunity for authors to suggest areas of research and the quality of research that is necessary to fill identified evidence gaps to inform policy and practice around a certain intervention.

The PHRG will seek to highlight the need for quality primary studies in areas identified as inadequate by Cochrane reviews of public health interventions. The PHRG's register of primary studies will also serve to highlight where there is a paucity of good quality research of public health topics.

For more information please contact:

Jodie Doyle jdoyle@vichealth.vic.gov.au
Elizabeth Waters ewaters@deakin.edu.au
www.ph.cochrane.org