

Spokesperson policy

<http://community.cochrane.org/organizational-info/resources/policies/spokesperson-policy>

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An official Cochrane policy. Last updated September 2016.

For more information on individual and organizational presentation of Cochrane's work, please see our [Logo and endorsement policy](#).

If you're wondering how to implement this policy, please feel free to use the [resources](#) that the [Knowledge Translation Department](#) (KT) has prepared, or contact us with questions.

Rationale - what is the purpose of this policy?

Cochrane is an international collaboration involving more than 38,000 individuals from many different institutions and organizations. These individuals are our most valuable asset and play an important role in helping Cochrane achieve its *Strategy to 2020*. Because individuals who contribute to Cochrane often have multiple affiliations (both inside and outside of Cochrane), it is important we establish clear guidance about who can speak officially on behalf of Cochrane and the circumstances in which it is appropriate to do so.

This policy clarifies who can represent, write and speak officially on behalf of Cochrane and how they should do it.¹ For the purposes of this policy we define an official spokesperson as an individual who has the authority to speak formally on behalf of Cochrane.

As Cochrane grows and our profile increases, failure to differentiate between official Cochrane policy and individual collaborator's views could cause misunderstandings about our positions, potentially damage our reputation and credibility, and in extreme cases, lead to financial losses and legal action. While there will always be some people who deliberately misconstrue whether someone is speaking officially on behalf of Cochrane, we can protect against this by clarifying when we are speaking on Cochrane's behalf or in a personal capacity. This is particularly relevant if there is reason to believe that what is being said could be misinterpreted as official Cochrane policy.

Cochrane policies and positions

As a registered UK charity, we are governed by laws on what we can and cannot speak about, as it must be based on advancing our mission.² To that end, Cochrane must develop policies to guide who speaks officially for it. In terms of how we develop policies, please refer to our official *Policy Development Framework* as this guides how we formulate policy positions. (To see information on all Cochrane policies, please go to our [Policies page](#).)

The bulk of the responsibilities to be the ‘official’ spokesperson will fall to the Co-Chairs of the Cochrane Steering Group (CSG), Editor in Chief, CEO, Directors of Centres, Associated Centres and Networks, and Coordinating Editors.

Balancing official responsibilities and academic freedom

Many Cochrane contributors are experts in their field and have every right to discuss their work and express their personal views – this may include expressing opinions on Cochrane policies and Cochrane Reviews. This policy is not intended to infringe Cochrane’s long-standing tradition of rigorous academic and scientific debate, but to provide guidance in line with our standing as a charity, on when and how an individual can represent Cochrane as an official spokesperson, and when and how she/he makes clear that the views expressed are their own.

In short, Cochrane contributors have the liberty to say whatever they like within the bounds of the principles the collaboration; you just can’t say whatever you like *on behalf of Cochrane*. Members of the collaboration need to respect Cochrane’s official policies and positions, even when they might individually disagree.

In balancing our obligations to Cochrane with our academic freedom as individuals, the more senior an individual is within Cochrane, the greater their obligation to clarify in what capacity they are speaking – in their Cochrane capacity, in another professional capacity, or in a personal capacity. The best practice is for everyone in Cochrane to clarify which “hat” they are wearing when they speak.

In some instances, due to an individual’s position, whatever that person says could be construed as official policy. Such individuals must be even more diligent in clarifying when they are speaking on behalf of Cochrane.

How to make clear you are speaking in a personal capacity about Cochrane

If you are expressing a view about Cochrane-related issues you should state clearly that you are speaking in a personal (or other professional) capacity unless you have been expressly authorized to represent Cochrane (as outlined below).³

If you have multiple affiliations or positions, you may choose not to use your Cochrane affiliation if this may cause confusion.⁴ If you do use your Cochrane affiliation along with another title, or if Cochrane is the only title or affiliation you have, then it is incumbent upon you to state unequivocally and clearly that the views are your own and not those of Cochrane. This cannot be implied, but must be stated explicitly. This is to avoid any misunderstandings or inaccurate assumptions on the part of the audience.

Examples of how to clarify that you are expressing your personal views and are not representing Cochrane might include (but not limited to the following):

1. When conducting a media interview, tell the journalist you are speaking in your personal capacity and not speaking on behalf of Cochrane. During the interview use phrases such as, “in my opinion...”
2. In instances where you are presenting a paper, when using your Cochrane title, you should include statements in your slides such as “The views expressed are my opinions and not the expressed views of any organization to which I am affiliated.”

If you did not make it clear at the time of speaking that the views expressed were your personal ones, please do so at the earliest possible opportunity. If the Central Executive is approached for clarification or comes across occasions where the position is unclear, a member of the Knowledge Translation Department (KT) will contact the individual involved and may ask them to clarify.

If you would like assistance on drafting written or spoken communication to clarify your position when speaking publicly, please contact [Jo Anthony](#), Head of the Knowledge Translation Department.

Who “authorizes” an official spokesperson

For Cochrane Reviews at a global level

Authors and members of Cochrane Review Group editorial teams are already free to discuss the findings of their reviews and don't need to seek permission. However, there are times when other people will also speak about a review's findings. As a general rule, when officially speaking about the findings of a Cochrane Review at a global level, official spokespersons (in order of preference) will be: the review authors, the respective group's Coordinating Editors (or nominee), and the Editor in Chief (or nominee). The same principle applies to members of Methods Groups, who also speak on behalf of Cochrane. Authors of any methodology-related papers that have been written for or commissioned by Cochrane are the first official spokesperson, followed by the relevant Methods Group's convenors (or nominee), and then the Editor in Chief or Methods Co-ordinator (or nominee).

Cochrane contributors may sometimes be asked or wish to comment on published reviews. In doing so they can speak freely, including expressing views that are critical. This is in line with Cochrane's established tradition of academic and scientific debate, as outlined previously. However, the contributors should make clear that they are expressing personal opinions, and statements should be consistent with Cochrane policies on respect. They should not be libellous or offensive.

Global

The decision about who can speak on behalf of Cochrane globally (on matters other than specific Cochrane Reviews) will be taken by the KT Department, in consultation with relevant individuals, such as the Co-Chairs of the CSG and the Central Executive Team (CET). In many cases, this is likely to be the Co-Chairs or a senior member of the CET, such as the Editor in Chief or CEO. However, depending on the issue, it may also be appropriate to nominate other individuals within Cochrane who have specialist expertise.

Country or regional level

In a specific country or region, the spokesperson will be the Director of the Cochrane Centre, Associate Centre or Network who is the designated leader or co-ordinator of Cochrane activities there, or a designated member of his or her team. The KT Department and other members of CET will provide support as needed.

Please note that it is common courtesy and best practice, if you are speaking in a country or have been interviewed by media within a country⁵ with a Cochrane presence - and are referring to Cochrane - to inform the Director responsible for Cochrane activities in that country at the earliest convenience (<http://www.cochrane.org/contact/centres>).

If you are meeting with funders to support your Cochrane or Cochrane-related work outside of the ones that already fund your Cochrane activities, it is your responsibility to inform the Director responsible for Cochrane activities in that country of your discussions, as well as other Groups that receive funds from that funder. You should make clear to those funders that you are not speaking on behalf of Cochrane, unless you are given express authorization from that Group. The KT Department can provide support on ensuring that all relevant people are notified in these situations.

Timing

In a 24/7 news environment, there will be times when Cochrane needs to respond quickly to breaking news or allegations in the media. If you find instances where Cochrane's reputation is called into question, please inform a member of the [KT team](#), who will work with other members of the CET, Cochrane groups and CSG Co-Chairs as needed to develop a response. When appropriate, we will publish, sign and date our response on [cochrane.org](http://www.cochrane.org) so that Cochrane members can share this information as well.

Channels

All of this guidance applies across communications channels. Specific guidance is listed for social media in Appendix A.

Compliance

The intent of this policy is to establish guidelines for members of Cochrane. Given the complexity, scale, scope, and culture of our work, this is challenging. However, the organization also needs to protect its reputation and ensure clarity and coherence in conveying its official policies, positions, and key messages to the world. Therefore, the Cochrane Steering Group supports compliance with the policy and will, if required, reinforce this with further action.

Where to go for further guidance—

If you are unsure of anything in this policy or have questions about how to apply it, please email the KT team at janthony@cochrane.org, and we will be happy to help.

Appendix A

Social media guidance

Social media is a rapidly growing channel for Cochrane where we can share and react to the latest information quickly. Its constantly changing nature requires broad but clear guidance.

Our working social media policy is adopted from the Mayo Clinic's 12-Word Social Media Policy:

'Don't Lie, Don't Pry,
Don't Cheat, Can't Delete,
Don't Steal, Don't Reveal.'⁶

Our policies will be applicable to anyone working in social media on behalf of Cochrane.

'Official' Cochrane accounts

If you manage an 'official' Cochrane account, on behalf of a specific Cochrane Group, your content should focus on information pertaining to Cochrane's mission. It is the nature of social media to be more informal, so as long as there is at least a tangential link to our mission and evidence-based discussion, this is acceptable. Similarly, personal touches and a relaxed style are good practice in social media communication, but please refrain from posting personal information (e.g., what you cooked for dinner).

Personal accounts

If you are using a personal account to distribute Cochrane information, please make your association with Cochrane clear in your profile section (i.e., if you are an employee or Cochrane author), and state explicitly that your opinions are personal and don't necessarily represent Cochrane's views or policies.

(Sample text: "Cochrane author [employee]. All views expressed are my own unless RTs⁷ [shares].")

If you have questions about using social media for any aspect of Cochrane work, please contact the [KT Department team](#) and we will be happy to provide advice and support.

Notes

¹ While individual conduct is outside of this policy, it is still expected that Cochrane collaborators will follow the principles of the organization and will respect the laws and customs of the country in which they are speaking.

² Speaking out: guidance on campaigning and political activity by charities

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/speaking-out-guidance-on-campaigning-and-political-activity-by-charities-cc9/speaking-out-guidance-on-campaigning-and-political-activity-by-charities>

General guidance of meeting our charitable obligations in this area is that as long as our policy positions are grounded in evidence and we can link this back to our mission, we can say it.

³ This policy does not dictate the exact phrasing to make this distinction clear, it asks that you make an honest attempt to do so to avoid any confusion or misunderstandings.

⁴ That doesn't mean you need to "hide" your position or affiliation with Cochrane. On the contrary, we should be transparent about associations with Cochrane and other organisations, but if you do mention your official title, it is even more important that you are clear whether you are speaking on behalf of Cochrane.

⁵ This may not be practical in all cases, so please do your best.

⁶ <http://network.socialmedia.mayoclinic.org/discussion/a-12-word-social-media-policy/>

⁷ RTs mean retweets in Twitter.