



Cochrane
St Albans House
57-59 Haymarket
London
SW1Y 4QX
UK

T +44(0) 207 183 7503

Letter to Board of EBM Netzwerk

Dear Dr Lühmann, Prof Dr Sönnichsen, Univ -Prof Dr Mühlhauser and Univ -Prof Dr Meyer

We are writing as Co-Chairs of the Cochrane Governing Board, in response to the letter you wrote to Cochrane's CEO and Editor-in-Chief on 4th October 2018, and which you have made publicly available on your website. We will post this reply on our website also.

Your letter contains a number of inaccuracies. It also draws conclusions on the basis of limited, biased evidence. Given your network's position in promoting the teaching and practice of evidence-based medicine we hope that, moving forward, you will consider the entire body of evidence pertaining to this matter. As mentioned in the Board's statements and other correspondence, Professor Gøtzsche maintained a consistent pattern of disruptive and inappropriate behaviours, over a number of years, which undermined Cochrane's collaborative culture and were detrimental to the charity's work, reputation and members. He consistently placed his own interests above those of Cochrane. Many of his behaviours were beyond explanation by academic or cultural differences. Furthermore, multiple warnings were given and conversations took place over many years in concerted attempts to deal constructively with the issues.

With regard to your concern over transparency, please note that when we have been able to do so, we have shared specific examples of the behaviours mentioned above. The Board has, however, been constrained in what it has been able to say by the rules of privacy and confidentiality that Professor Gøtzsche and his supporters have – from 13th September onwards - disregarded. When we have been able to speak out, we have done so and will continue to do so.

If we interpret your letter correctly, it appears that you condone the behaviour of Professor Peter Gøtzsche. We respectfully suggest that the behaviours he demonstrated both before 13th September 2018, when our Board first considered them, and especially subsequently (he has continued to disseminate shockingly defamatory materials) are not behaviours that would be found acceptable to the Universitätsklinikum Hamburg-Eppendorf, Universität Witten, Universität Hamburg, Martin Luther University, or other esteemed institutions. We should like to understand why then would they be acceptable to the EBM Netzwerk?

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Cochrane is a UK charity that operates under British law. Our Board has acted at all times, with honesty and integrity, in accordance with the law and with the advice of our lawyers. At no stage in the process did “a minority of board members” expel him. As we have publicly stated, 11 out of 12 Board members voted that he had breached the Board’s Code of Conduct for Trustees. The Code expects Trustees to behave with Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and to be committed to good Leadership. As a result of this, and all of the evidence presented to the Board, and in considering what was in the best interests of Cochrane and the public, the majority of Trustees voted that ending Professor Gøtzsche’s membership was a necessary and proportionate response. Four of the 12 Board members did not agree, but respected due process and chose to resign.

By a majority vote Professor Gøtzsche was given notice of the intention to terminate his membership, and this was upheld after a period during which he made written representations. A period, however, in which he breached his duties as a Trustee and started the dissemination of private, confidential and defamatory materials. He continues to engage in this behaviour.

We are disappointed if your organization, and those who fund you, believe that high esteem is more important than respectful, collaborative behaviour that clearly serves the best interests of Cochrane, as well as other organizations that hold employees, volunteers and others to high standards of conduct.

Should you have any questions, we will be happy to meet with you by phone conference to discuss them further.

Marguerite Koster
Co-Chair

Martin Burton
Co-Chair

Cochrane Governing Board