

Erroneous and mendacious statements by the Cochrane Governing Board

Hawkes' articles are usually very good, but he got it completely wrong this time by relying on official statements issued by the Cochrane Governing Board. I have described this in detail on www.deadlymedicines.dk, most recently updated yesterday.

I have not ceased to be the director of the Nordic Cochrane Centre. I still direct the centre and yesterday, I informed Cochrane's CEO that the Nordic Cochrane Centre withdrew from the Cochrane Collaboration (1). We are now an independent centre, no longer subjected to the scientific censorship that the current Cochrane leadership favours (2,3), and we continue our work as usual.

Hawkes: "The statement issued by the board said that its decision was based on an ongoing, consistent pattern of disruptive and inappropriate behaviours by Gøtzsche, taking place over a number of years, that had undermined Cochrane's collaborative culture and were detrimental to the charity's work, reputation, and members."

This is blatantly false (4). Firstly, at no point has Cochrane demonstrated to me, or its hired Counsel, that I have damaged the "the charity's work, reputation and members". In fact, I have done the opposite. I have contributed to robust debate on important scientific issues, which has only served to strengthen Cochrane's reputation. In contrast, the Board has brought Cochrane into serious disrepute by its unjustified actions against me.

Secondly, the issue was not about "behaviour." The Board has conflated its baseless allegations about my 'bad behaviour' with the legal investigation it instituted. The minutes from the teleconference on 13 June where the Board decided to establish an independent review states: "In brief, after MW [Mark Wilson, Cochrane's CEO] referred the matter of an alleged breach of the Spokesperson Policy by PG [Peter Gøtzsche] to the Co-Chairs, and in the light of PG's complaint directly to the Board about actions taken by MW [he planned to write to two complainants that I had broken the Spokesperson Policy, although this was not the case; and although Cochrane's Counsel later agreed with me that I had not broken the Policy], the Co-Chairs made a proposal to both MW and PG. The proposal was that an Independent Review be undertaken, with the Reviewer making recommendations to the Board in the form of a confidential Report."

So, the Board instituted a legal review because of disputes between Cochrane's CEO and me about the interpretation of the Cochrane Spokesperson Policy. It had absolutely nothing to do with "disruptive and inappropriate behaviour." This excuse was only invented after Counsel had exonerated me. It was a show trial. For full transparency, I have decided to waive my right to privacy, and make Counsel's report Accessible (5), as the public interest in this report must override any attempts at keeping it secret by people who have exposed me to a witch-hunt over four years and a show trial now.

Hawkes: "He had, the statement charged, "repeatedly represented his personal views as those of Cochrane, including in correspondence with members of the academic community; in the media; and when acting as an expert witness in a criminal trial.""

The Board's statement is mendacious. It has been clearly stated by Cochrane's Counsel that these allegations could not be substantiated. I have never presented any personal views in a way that could be honestly interpreted as if they were those of Cochrane as an organisation. Cochrane's own law firm exonerated me in relation to these false allegations. The Counsel does not in any single case agree with the Board and Cochrane's CEO that I have broken the Spokesperson Policy. Nonetheless, the Board has consistently argued that Counsel did not exonerate me. This is not true. For example, Counsel writes this, about my role as expert witness (5):

"My conclusion is the same in relation to the expert report and the subsequent complaint against Professor Loonen in the Dutch proceedings. PG was there plainly not speaking about "Cochrane-related issues." I do not think it can be said that he was speaking officially on behalf of Cochrane."

Hawkes: "As a leader of Cochrane he had a special duty of care to the organisation about the way his views were expressed, particularly those made in a personal capacity."

This is misleading. Firstly, we should not have double standards in Cochrane, and there are no 'separate rules' for Board members who also happen to be scientists that publish in the medical literature. Secondly, our Spokesperson Policy encourages people to criticise Cochrane reviews, and we also have an annual prize for it (3).

Although the Board denies this, our criticism of the Cochrane HPV vaccines review played a key role for my expulsion (3). We published a criticism of the Cochrane HPV vaccines review on 27 July. Cochrane's Editor in Chief and his Deputy opined that we had "substantially overstated" our criticisms and they concluded that we made allegations that are not warranted and provided an inaccurate and sensationalized report (3). We dug deeper and strengthened our criticism on 17 September (3), which was that many trials and patients had been missed in the Cochrane review and that harms had been overlooked.

In early September, letters of complaint were sent to co-chair of the Board, Martin Burton (3). There is evidence suggesting that he orchestrated these himself (6). These letters, two of which were from previous co-chairs, argued for scientific censorship and for my expulsion from the Board because I had criticised a Cochrane review publicly (3).

Hawkes: "Despite numerous attempts to engage with him on this topic and warnings about his behaviour, he consistently failed to exercise this care," the statement said. "This has resulted in multiple complaints to the charity and damaged its credibility within the research community."

I have not received numerous "warnings" about my "behaviour" or explanations about what is objectionable about my behaviour. Again, the only complaints about me have been in response to my scientific critiques, often by those whose science I have disagreed with. Simply publicly disagreeing with someone's science is hardly a basis for complaint about my 'behaviour.'

Hawkes: "He had claimed that they [psychiatric drugs] were the UK's third biggest killer, after heart disease and cancer, and failed to make clear this was his view and not Cochrane's."

My “claim” was evidence-based, based on the best research I could find and documented in my book about psychiatry that was published at the same time as my newspaper article (7). It is blatantly false when the Board alleges that I failed to make clear this was my view and not Cochrane’s. This was very clear from the article. Counsel wrote about this: “my view is that all these events are historic and the parties resolved them at the time, or decided to let them lie. I do not believe that it serves any useful purpose to go over this old ground.”

Hawkes mentions my letter in BMJ in 2015 in relation to the Maudsley debate where I wrote: “David Tovey is not a psychiatrist, but Cochrane’s deputy CEO and editor-in-chief. Unsurprisingly, journalists and others have therefore interpreted the four Cochrane editors’ [including three editors of Cochrane mental health groups] denigration of my research as a thinly disguised attempt at protecting psychiatry’s guild interests, and some even suspect that they also tried to protect the drug industry” (8).

Because of this comment, Cochrane’s CEO threatened to close the Nordic Cochrane Centre if I did not publish an apology. I wrote: “As I did not intend to question my four Cochrane colleagues’ integrity, I withdraw this statement to avoid any misunderstandings and I apologize for any hurt and confusion caused” (9).

Hawkes writes: “Less than two years later Gøtzsche was elected a member of the board. He has claimed that he came top of the poll of 11 candidates for four board positions.”

As the number of votes have been published, this is not a claim but a fact. I was the only candidate that had dared criticise the Cochrane leadership and its current direction of travel, which focuses on “brand” and “business”; favours scientific censorship; and allows researchers with financial conflicts of interest related to the drugs they are reviewing to become authors of Cochrane reviews.

We recently found out that the first author of the Cochrane HPV vaccines review, Marc Arbyn, has financial conflicts of interest related to the vaccine manufacturers he did not declare in the Cochrane review. Here is one among several examples (10,11). According to Cochrane policy, he cannot be first author with such conflicts. It will be interesting to see what the Cochrane leadership will do about this.

1 <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/G%C3%B8tzsche-Withdrawing-the-Nordic-Cochrane-Centre-from-the-Cochrane-Collaboration.pdf>

2 <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/G%C3%B8tzsche-letter-to-Cochranes-CEO-about-our-webpage.pdf>

3 <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/17-September-The-HPV-vaccines.pdf>

4 <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/G%C3%B8tzsches-comments-on-Cochrane-Statement-26-Sept.pdf>

5 http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Counsel_s-report.-12-Sept.pdf

6 <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/G%C3%B8tzsche-appeal-of-expulsion-from-Cochrane.pdf>

7 Gøtzsche PC. Deadly psychiatry and organised denial. Copenhagen: People's Press; 2015.

8 Gøtzsche PC. Author's reply to "Long term use of psychiatric drugs: recommendations in debate are insufficiently justified. BMJ 2015; 6 June, page 20.

9 <http://www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h2435/rr-14>

10 <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/hpv-prevention-control-board/about-us-hpv-prevention-control/structure/advisors/>

11 <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/hpv-prevention-control-board/about-us-hpv-prevention-control/supports-and-grants/>