



Cochrane board confirms dismissal of director at appeal

Nigel Hawkes

London

The board of Cochrane has voted to confirm the dismissal of Peter Gøtzsche from all his roles in the organisation. The decision means that he ceases to be a member of Cochrane, director of the Nordic Cochrane Centre, and a member of the board, to which he was elected in 2017.

He had been removed from the board at an earlier meeting,¹ but as was his right he had appealed against the decision. This appeal was always likely to be rejected, as four of his supporters had resigned from the board,¹ leaving only those who had originally voted in favour of sacking him.

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.

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.”

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. “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.”

Despite the statement saying that complaints against Gøtzsche spanned several years, little had emerged publicly before his expulsion. The board minutes provide few hints of what was brewing. The only time the row broke surface was in 2015, when a statement signed by the co-chairs, chief executive, and

editor in chief of Cochrane dissociated the organisation from opinions expressed by Gøtzsche about psychiatric drugs in an article in the *Daily Mail*.

He had claimed that they 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. This had followed a dispute involving *The BMJ*, also about Gøtzsche’s views on psychiatric drugs. He wrote a letter to *The BMJ* in June 2015² criticising the Cochrane editors and prompting a row with Mark Wilson, now Cochrane chief executive, and the board co-chairs, who described Gøtzsche’s criticisms as “unwarranted and unfair.” Gøtzsche was persuaded, and eventually agreed, to submit a rapid response to *The BMJ* withdrawing his criticisms.³

But soon after came the *Daily Mail* article and the response on the Cochrane website.

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.

His election statement made it clear that he was not seeking election to rubber stamp decisions made by others. He said that Cochrane was being run “more as a business with a brand than it was a few years ago” and warned that too much power was being assumed by the centre. “I will work on refocusing our central values and aims,” he concluded.

bmj.com **Editor’s Choice** Reinvigorating Cochrane doi:10.1136/bmj.k3966

- 1 Hawkes N. Cochrane director’s expulsion results in four board members resigning. *BMJ* 2018;362:k3945. doi:10.1136/bmj.k3945 30224559
- 2 Gøtzsche PC. Author’s reply to Tovey and colleagues. *BMJ* 2015;350:h2955. doi:10.1136/bmj.h2955 26037227
- 3 Gøtzsche P. Re: Does long term use of psychiatric drugs cause more harm than good? *BMJ* 2015. doi:https://www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h2435/rr-14.

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>