

10 October A. Cochrane leadership in moral meltdown: miscarriage of justice and lies about the evidence in journal article

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The Cochrane saga has escalated and the leadership's attacks on me continues. The Cochrane Governing Board hired a law firm to look at the issues related to disagreements between Mark Wilson, Cochrane's CEO, and me about the interpretation of the Cochrane Spokesperson Policy. Counsel's report from 12 September was labelled STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. TO THE GOVERNING BOARD AND MR MARK WILSON. NOT TO BE DISSEMINATED ANY WIDER.

However, after my public expulsion from the Board without any clear or transparent explanation, I uploaded Counsel's report on 27 September, on my website www.deadlymedicines.dk. The next day, on 28 September, *STAT and Retraction Watch* published an article where Cochrane Governing Board co-chair Marguerite Koster gave reasons for my expulsion from the Board and Cochrane.

Presumably, Koster thought I would not dare publish the confidential report and that she would therefore not be held accountable for her misleading statements. She miscalculated. Virtually everything Koster said in the interview is either mendacious or seriously misleading.

I told *STAT and Retraction Watch* that I had been subjected to a show trial. Contrary to the statements by Wilson and the Board, the law firm hired by Cochrane exonerated me of the charges related to my use of our Centre's letterhead and my alleged failure to distinguish between my own views and those of Cochrane as an organisation; see Counsel's report on my website,¹ and also a brilliant analysis of Cochranes's wrong-doing by a person unknown to me.²

Koster mentions events going back to 2003, although I wrote in my report to Counsel³ that this is mismanagement according to Cochrane procedures. Counsel also found it inappropriate: "all these events are historic and the parties resolved them at the time, or decided to let them lie ... I am not sure whether it would fair on PG to come to conclusions on matters which lie in the past."

Koster's accusation that I have repeatedly misused the letterhead of my Centre to espouse personal views is blatantly false, and in a letter to me from 3 October, she back-pedalled: The Board found that I had "broken the spirit of the Spokesperson Policy if not the letter." I wonder what this means for Cochrane members. Has Cochrane become a religion?

¹ http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Counsel_s-report.-12-Sept.pdf

² <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/October-1-A.-Rthorat-Some-thoughts-on-the-Cochrane-mess.pdf>

³ <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/G%C3%B8tzsche-Reply-from-Peter-G%C3%B8tzsche-to-Cochranes-law-firm-66-pages.pdf>

No one has ever been honestly in doubt whether my views were also those of Cochrane as an organisation. The complaints have come from disgruntled scientists, who hold opposing views to my own, and deliberately seek to antagonise me.

Wilson and the Board tried to validate the accusation that I misused the Centre's letterhead by referencing Cochrane's Spokesperson Policy. I tested the policy empirically this summer, and very few of the 21 of 24 people I contacted who responded felt I had broken the Spokesperson Policy in relation to the two most recent complaints, which Koster alludes to; very few people found the policy unambiguous and easy to interpret; and by far most people felt it should be improved. Furthermore, Counsel disagreed with the views of the Board and Cochrane's CEO, clearly stating that I had not broken the Spokesperson Policy in any single case. For example, Counsel wrote: "The letter to Dr Torrey [a US psychiatrist] involves, as I understand it, the pursuit of non-Cochrane related work." This means that I cannot have breached the Spokesperson Policy, which says: "**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."

Koster opines that it was very disturbing to the organization that I had used the letterhead of my centre "in correspondence that didn't reflect Cochrane views." In what world does it make sense to threaten to close an entire Cochrane Centre because its director asked for information on how and why so many young people died in a study where they were treated with neuroleptics? Who wants to be a part of an organization where its CEO expends his energy on inconsequential issues related to the use of a letterhead rather than supporting Cochrane researchers who ask questions about patients who likely died because of the drug they took?

Koster says that it is not a Cochrane view to ask a funder about deaths in a study. This shows that Cochrane has suffered a total moral meltdown. It is reprehensible that Cochrane leaders – the CEO and the co-chairs - are more interested in pursuing trivial allegations regarding a letterhead than in saving people's lives. Please compare Wilson's draft reply to Torrey⁴ with my draft reply.⁵ This is highly revealing.

In relation to the other recent complaint, Counsel wrote: "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." I provided scientific evidence to the court that two homicides were very likely caused by the drug the patient was taking. Yet, Koster continues to misrepresent Counsel's findings and obsesses about the Centre's letterhead. The proposition, that someone with my scientific profile can separate myself from the Nordic Cochrane Centre where I have acquired most of my expertise, is absurd.

⁴ <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2e-Wilsons-draft-response-to-Torrey-11-April-with-G%C3%B8tzsches-comments-18-April.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/1d-G%C3%B8tzsche-suggested-replies-to-Fuller-Torrey-and-Pottegaard-18-March.pdf>

Cochrane's hypocrisy and double standards become evident when Wilson and Cochrane's Editor in Chief, David Tovey, who is also Deputy CEO, exonerated a member of their own staff in early September for doing precisely what Wilson accused me of doing.⁶ It seems that, in Cochrane, some are more equal than others, as George Orwell wrote in *Animal Farm*. When I sought the opportunity to explain this double standard to the Board, I was denied this (see footnote 6).

Koster notes that I was particularly outspoken about psychiatry and the Cochrane HPV vaccine review. What does she think is wrong with that? What I say and write is always evidence-based. Koster says that the decision to expel me was not based on my criticism of the Cochrane HPV vaccine review. This is blatantly false (see, for example, my complaint to the Charity Commission from 9 October on www.deadlymedicines.dk).

Koster's claim is contradicted by the fact that co-chair Martin Burton seems to have orchestrated remarkably similar letters of complaint, including from two previous co-chairs, calling for my expulsion from the Board ***because I had criticised the Cochrane HPV vaccine review.***⁷

On 5 September, the Cochrane IT staff, that work alongside us at the Nordic Cochrane Centre, reported having had a conference call with Wilson, Tovey and Deputy Editor in Chief, Karla Soares-Weiser, where Wilson told them that action would be taken in Edinburgh because we had criticized the Cochrane HPV vaccine review. Wilson indicated that this was serious and that it was unprecedented that we had published our criticism in a competing journal. This is not true. It has happened many times in Cochrane, and we did it ourselves recently, related to a Cochrane review of methylphenidate for ADHD, which was subsequently withdrawn because it was of exceedingly poor quality.⁸ Wilson clearly indicated that criticism of Cochrane reviews was not welcome.

The fact that Wilson pre-empted that action would be taken against me in Edinburgh shows that he, and some of the Board members, had already decided to oust me from the Board before any democratic vote or legal outcome.

Koster says that I have criticised Cochrane editors for denigrating my research about psychiatric drugs. However, I have a right to defend my scientific reputation (see my complaint to the Charity Board about this incident). Further, this means that in Cochrane, only one side of a debate is allowed to be heard, cf. that our criticism of the Cochrane HPV vaccines review.

Koster says that I breached confidentiality and violated my responsibilities as a member of the Board after I was expelled from the Board. This is a self-serving argument. After being denied fair process and a forum to defend myself against multiple false accusations, it was only then, that I decided to go public. It was the only way to shine a light on the gross injustice I suffered after being expelled on 13 September, and after Martin Burton had read aloud his seriously defamatory

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

⁷ <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/17-September-The-HPV-vaccines.pdf>

⁸ Boesen K, Saiz LC, Erviti J, Storebø OJ, Gluud C, Gøtzsche PC, Jørgensen KJ. The Cochrane Collaboration withdraws a review on methylphenidate for adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Evid Based Med* 2017; 10.1136/ebmed-2017-110716.

and misleading ‘hate speech’ at the Annual General Meeting on 17 September. It is up on YouTube; Burton’s hate speech starts after 36m20s and ends 10 minutes later.⁹ The questions related to his speech start after 1h15m and end after 1h34m. I made it clear that I waived my right to confidentiality. I must be allowed to defend myself against defamation, mendacious allegations and horrible insinuations, and I have documented how misleading the Cochrane Board Statement from 17 September is, which is the same as Burton’s hate speech.¹⁰

Finally, Koster denies, despite clear evidence to the contrary, that Cochrane is going through a governance crisis and claims that “The vast majority of responses I’ve received have been very thankful that actions are being taken, and that this kind of behavior should not be permitted.”

We still don’t know what “this kind of behaviour” means, which is reflected in a recent statement,¹¹ “Cochrane crisis,” by the Coordinating Editor of the Cochrane Work group; by an open letter from the German Network of Evidence-based Medicine to Cochrane’s CEO and Deputy CEO,¹² and by a statement by Gerd Antes, founder of the German Cochrane Centre, which speaks about a “Cochrane Governance crisis.”¹³

In contrast, we have seen a lot of bad behaviour on the part of the co-chairs. Koster is guilty of selective reporting and cherry picking. Cochrane has around 12,000 members and we don’t know what all these people think. But we do know that many people are highly dissatisfied that the Board has not told them what the reasons are for my expulsion. This dissatisfaction is growing, which is why the Board held a crisis meeting on 4 October over the web for Cochrane members.

This won’t work and will not calm people down. There are now people, both in- and outside Cochrane, who are calling for a totally independent investigation into what happened in relation to my expulsion from the Board and Cochrane. One such call suggests that Martin Burton and Mark Wilson should be involved with the investigation. This would be irresponsible, given they are centrally involved in the dispute. They should have absolutely nothing to do with such an investigation.

I recommend people to look up www.deadlymedicines.dk where the events are described in chronological order.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLG5NKphXq0>

¹⁰ <http://www.deadlymedicines.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/G%C3%B8tzsche-comments-on-Statement-by-Cochrane-Governing-Board-from-17-Sept-1.pdf>

¹¹ <https://work.cochrane.org/news/cochrane-crisis>

¹² <https://www.ebm-netzwerk.de/aktuelles/news2018-10-04>

¹³ <https://www.cochrane.de/de/cochrane-media-explanation-contradictions-and-conflicts>