

Wilson's unfortunate interventions when negotiating with six centre directors in 2016

I was a member of a working group of six centre directors that negotiated with Wilson about what a contract between him and centres should look like. We had never had such a contract before, and it was a highly sensitive issue because centres acquire their own funding and thereby are able to offer something of value to the Cochrane Collaboration for free. However, although we are not employed by Wilson, he wanted to treat us as his staff and to micromanage us, even though he denied this when we challenged him.

Wilson's suggested Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was totally unacceptable for us. A huge number of detailed rules demonstrated a fundamental lack of trust and insight into our work and what is important. We were also told not to misuse the "Cochrane Brand or logo," for example to obtain funds that were not then used directly to support Cochrane activities. This meant that we could no longer apply for funding using our own letterhead, which would be harmful for Cochrane because centres often survive by obtaining funding for non-Cochrane activities.

There was an absurd clause in the draft: "5.1 All Parties agree to hold the terms of this MOU (and related information and documentation) in confidence and not to disclose such information to any third party without the prior written consent of the other Parties. This paragraph shall not apply to any specific disclosures which may be required by law." This is how the drug industry operates, but such secrecy goes directly against Wilson's own policies, e.g. "The organisation maintains a commitment to openness and transparency in relationships, communications and actions." What if my government, which funds the Nordic Cochrane Centre and three Cochrane review groups, asked to see the contract?

In the middle of our negotiations with Wilson we were suddenly sent a version that was announced as being "final." It was nowhere near of being final. On 13 August 2016, I explained to my colleagues in our little working group:

We offer our services to Cochrane for free and we find the funding for our activities ourselves, so why sign a document that looks like Mark being the employer and us his employees? It makes no sense to me. Of particular note, several directors I have spoken to are very much against the idea that Mark should discuss with each of us what we can deliver for Cochrane considering the funding we have. This could destroy much of our enthusiasm for Cochrane and even our funding. For example, much of the work Karsten (my deputy director) and I do, is not directly Cochrane related but benefits people all over the world and earns us many bonus points with Danish politicians and helps ensure that our rather generous funding continues. We do a tremendous amount of work that makes the good name of Cochrane better known, e.g. we talk to journalists several times a week from all over the world. But we are never praised for this; all we hear from the CEO and his staff and the two co-chairs of the Steering Group is that "now we have broken the Spokesperson policy again", which we never do, as I have explained in numerous emails to them, most recently in June and July this year. But they continue to harass us. I describe this problem in more diplomatic terms in the attached document.

I sent a further email about our problems with Wilson to our working group on 2 October 2016, which I reproduce in its entirety here, as it is very important and also very revealing about Wilson's harmful style of interacting with other people:

*Subject: Recent events related to the draft MoU and Mark's intervention, a summary
This email is obviously confidential.
A few clarifications.*

1. In our phone conference with Mark Wilson on 7 Sept we agreed that we should respect the other directors by sending them the draft before Mark saw it. Mark did not like this, so I repeated it. I made notes while we were

talking so I know that this is precisely what we agreed. I told Mark that this would not delay the process, as we could say to centre and branch directors that they should respond within 2-3 days, and only if they had a burning issue, as there would be another opportunity to discuss the MoU in Seoul. I explained to Mark that it was not only about respecting our colleagues but also about that we might benefit ourselves, if one of our colleagues had a bright idea, none of us had thought about. I believe the reason why some of you seem to be in doubt about what we agreed on 7 Sept is psychological. Mark is a very strong person and he opposed my suggestion. Psychological research has shown that in such a situation people might modify in their brains what actually happened. Memories are subject to many psychological influences, which also crime detectives know a lot about. But I made notes while we talked, so I actually KNOW what happened, which I hope you will accept.

2. Mark contacted Lotty earlier this week and insisted that he should see our draft before it went to other directors. Thereby he unilaterally broke our mutual agreement.

3. Mark wrote in an email to me (30 Sept), which he copied to you:

You highlight the need for transparency in our dealings with one another; and you claim that my refusal to send you and others emails I have sent and received is an abuse of trust. I completely reject this outrageous suggestion. In fact, I am a member of our little working group yet I am the only one who has been continually not copied into the communications you and the other members of the group have made about the MoU draft. As of this moment, I am also the only one of the working group who has not seen the draft and the contributions different members have had to it. The complete lack of transparency in the working practices of this group are obvious. But I have been asked by Joerg and Lotty to accept this way of working, and I have done so in the interests of facilitating an agreement. To be accused of a lack of transparency in my working dealings on this issue would be laughable if it wasn't so serious.

Marks email is misleading in several respects. First, he is NOT a member of our little working group, see point 1 above (Gerald also noticed this erroneous remark from Mark in an email he sent to us). Second, it was a clear agreement that we should work alone, without Mark, when we redrafted the MoU document. Third, this cannot be a complete lack of transparency in the working practices of this group, as we simply did what had been agreed. Fourth, it is a misleading comparison to say that if he should share with us the emails he says he has received from directors in relation to the MoU, we should also share with him our internal emails in relation to our work with redrafting the MoU. These are two completely different matters. We should of course not share with Mark our internal emails that have helped us find our feet and agree on an MoU that is radically different to the one Mark wanted us to sign.

I am also very disturbed by what Lotty wrote to us on 29 Sept:

"Mark asked me today (by email) to give an update on the new MoU draft because he was worried about the progress. Also, he was very clear that our draft version should first go to Mark and not to all Centre Directors. He was convinced that we agreed on that during the last TC [telephone conference]. He wants to sign off any final draft for Seoul that goes to the Directors and preferably with the support of the CoEds Exec [co-ordinating editors executive group, which has nothing to do with the centre directors] next week.

First, there was absolutely no reason at all to be worried about the progress, and I wonder what the evidence was for Mark's statement, as he didn't know what we were doing! Second, the agreement we made with Mark on 7 Sept included that we would be able to send something to him in due time before Seoul, and as Lotty has also explained, when we had our internal phone conference 26 Sept, we had agreed on 7 Sept that we would finish our work no later than 30 September. I clearly remember we said that at the teleconference with Mark on 7 Sept that this would mean that, after 2-3 days consultation with other directors, we could send a final draft to Mark around 7 October. So, absolutely no reason to worry about progress.

Second, Mark is not in a position to sign off anything that goes to Seoul! What goes to Seoul is clearly still an item for discussion, not something that is cast in stone and cannot be changed.

Lotty wrote this to us on 29 September:

Also, he asked me why it is possible that he's getting feedback of other Directors on his draft MoU version from outside our small group. He reminded me that we specifically agreed during the last TC that this would not happen and asked me for clarification. Which I couldn't give, because I am not aware of any distribution of this document outside our small group."

I find that this is inappropriate behaviour on part of our CEO who should not put pressure on Lotty in this way, on top of this in an email he later refuses to share with the rest of us. As I explained to Mark in my email from 29 September:

I cannot see there can be anything private in an email you sent to Lotty about our little working group, or about emails you receive from centre directors related to our MoU, which they were not supposed to send to you. We have no idea how this could happen, but since we work with rewriting the MoU, as you know, it would of course be helpful for us to see these emails.

I think it is better that I do not respond to Mark's email. I obviously made him very angry but those who should be upset are us, not him. I am certainly not the only one who has observed that Mark has a manipulative leadership style and may break promises he has agreed to respect. There are many examples of this, in fact. Some of the worst involves the US, the French and the Nordic Cochrane Centres, but people outside centres have told me of similar experiences.

I can tell you more about this. I hope we can meet in Seoul to discuss our relationship with our CEO.

Mismanagement by the CEO in relation to the establishment of new centres in Russia and Sweden

Russia

After 1.5 years of preparations, we established a branch of my centre in Moscow in mid-1999 with Vasiliy Vlassov as director. We needed to deregister it in 2007 after we had detected that money was made by secretly selling bits of Cochrane reviews to a journal owned by a co-director of the branch. We also found out that the website of the branch (www.cochrane.ru) contained materials or links to materials of a pornographic and, possibly, illegal nature. These materials appeared to have been posted on an open forum on the site, which clearly had not been monitored for some time.

In February 2014, I started preparations for opening a Russian branch in Kazan, with Lilia Ziganshina, professor at Kazan University, as director. On 9 June 2014 I got an email from her, which caused me to write immediately to Juliane Ried at Wilson's unit in London:

I kindly ask you not to make any further moves in the Russian-speaking part of the world without consulting with me first. And also to copy me on all emails that you send to a region I am responsible for. I did not know, for example, that you had suggested to Vlassov, that he should "help in setting up and coordinating a Russian project." There is a history that you likely do not know about. We once had a Russian branch, located in Moscow, with Vlassov as the branch director. I had to close the branch down because of practices we uncovered that were totally unacceptable. This decision was unanimously supported by my Advisory Board.

I therefore advise against what you suggest ... If coordination is needed, we should ask Liliya Ziganshina, head of our affiliated centre in Tatarstan. This is the only affiliated centre we have in the Russian-speaking part of the world.

Will you please confirm that you will not make any moves in the territory for which I am responsible and know the history without consulting me first, please?

Ried assured me that she would consult with me on any further Russian activities, and I wrote to Vlassov that, "As we have just established this as an affiliated centre, being responsible for the Russian speaking part of the world, it is premature to start thinking about other constructs." Vlassov had proposed to me to affiliate the "Russian Society for EBM" to the new affiliated centre, but as he had mismanaged seriously the former Russian branch, I was not keen to involve him but left that decision to Ziganshina.

Ziganshina responded to me that Vlassov was angry with her, accusing her of concealing something from him; that his email also contained erroneous information; and that he was still very well known as "a Cochrane activist" and still used his cochrane e-mail address (vlassov@cochrane.ru).

I had asked Vlassov many times not to use his @cochrane.ru email address, as it makes people believe that he is still the director of the Russian branch but he has refused. A Russian colleague informed me, also in 2014, that all former Soviet Union countries think he is still the director of the "Russian Cochrane Centre" (which has never existed; its name was the Russian Branch of the Nordic Cochrane Centre) and says that he represents the Nordic Cochrane Centre.

A year later, on 19 May 2015, I learned via an email Ziganshina had sent to my deputy director, who would be involved with a workshop about systematic reviews, that Ziganshina had also invited Erik von Elm, co-director of the Swiss Affiliated Cochrane Centre, to participate in the workshop. Von Elm had discussed the planned Russian event with Mark Wilson and got his support. I did not know why von Elm involved Cochrane's CEO in an arrangement in a country that it was my duty to take care of, without informing me, which he should have done according to our rules of operation.

On 6 July 2015, I was informed by Ziganshina that von Elm had suggested that Wilson came to the opening of the Russian branch. I was also informed that Wilson had suggested some dates in December, without copying me. Wilson did not copy me at any time, although it was not only his duty to do so, but also to get my permission for his interventions in my affairs. I asked Ziganshina to send me a copy of the mail from Wilson to her:

*On 5 July 2015 at 15:56, Mark Wilson <MWilson@cochrane.org> wrote:
Dear Liliya and Erik,*

Many thanks for letting me have the latest news on the symposium. I'd asked Cochrane Steering Group members based in Europe to see if they could represent Cochrane at the symposium in November so please let me have the new dates as soon as possible so that I can update them.

If you would like me or one of my Senior Management Team colleagues to attend, the window 7th-18th December would be best, avoiding Monday 14th when there may be a further Steering Group meeting.

Needless to say, this email infuriated me. The republics in the former Soviet Union was my responsibility; I had carefully worked with Ziganshina for 1.5 years in order to succeed with establishing a Russian branch; we had been through a lot of delicate political and other difficulties together; and now Wilson ignored me completely and only talked about himself, his staff and the Steering Group.

This is typical of the way Wilson operates. He does not give credit to people he does not like; he ignores them totally. This is extreme mismanagement that violates several of the most important principles we abide by in the Cochrane Collaboration (see my report). But it does not seem to matter that Wilson breaks the rules himself, which everyone else needs to respect.

The Russian branch was registered in August 2015. On 5 October, during the Cochrane Colloquium in Wien, I wrote to Ziganshina, Wilson, one of his staff members, my deputy, von Elm, the Deputy CEO, David Tovey, and the two co-chairs of the Steering Group, Lisa Bero and Cindy Farquhar, about the preparations for the Cochrane event in Kazan:

I am deeply dissatisfied about the way this has evolved, as it has not respected the way we have organised Cochrane. As Director of the Nordic Cochrane Centre, Russia and Russian speaking states are my responsibility and people in that region are accountable to me, not to Cochrane Switzerland or to the CEO.

I have prepared the registration of a Russian branch of my centre for over a year in collaboration with Lilia and also the meeting in December in Kazan. Then, all of a sudden, this summer Erik von Elm invited Mark Wilson to participate in this meeting without asking me first or even without informing me. I wrote to Erik on 6 July and asked "Please tell me why you involved Mark Wilson, our CEO, in this, as it is not his job to arrange meetings, and as Russia is our responsibility? I am just curious." Erik responded: "Why should Cochrane Central Team not know about symposium in Kazan? Did not suggest involving MW in planning but possibly have support. I think help for a new Cochrane Russia initiative should come from as much sides as possible, given importance but limited resources of all of us."

This summer, I asked Karsten, who is now my deputy director, to correspond with Lilia about the practical arrangements, copying me on the correspondence ... In August, I acquired a life-threatening disease but survived despite being treated by totally incompetent doctors, it was absolutely surrealistic. I had myself made the correct diagnosis but they refused to accept it or even order the necessary test. They could have killed me through their incompetence.

On 26 Sept, I wrote to Lilia "I am sorry but for personal reasons, I am not able to go to Kazan. I therefore ask you to consider another title for the talk I should have held, so that Karsten can hold it instead of me. Karsten is an excellent speaker and will serve you well. I still don't have access to my email programme and am seriously handicapped." (my computer had died suddenly).

I learned yesterday here in Wien that there will be a planning meeting for the Kazan conference involving Lilia, Erik and Mark and that Lorna from the CEO office asked whether Karsten should be invited. This is incredible to me. As my deputy and substitute at the meeting Karsten is THE person to invite, not Erik or Mark, as our centre is responsible for events in Russian speaking countries.

Does the CEO office not respect the rules we should abide by? It seems to me that it doesn't.

I look forward to a reply and also wonder why the CEO office is involved at all in the meeting in Kazan.

I did not get a reply from anyone to this email and Mark Wilson continued to ignore me and continued not to copy me on emails to Ziganshina. For example, he wrote to Ziganshina on 19 October about the preparations, copying his own staff and von Elm, but not me. It is amazing that not even the co-chairs reacted, as it is their job to govern our CEO and therefore also to tell him when he has done something wrong, but it illustrates just how powerful Wilson is compared to the Governing Board.

Sweden

Although we had done our utmost, we had never succeeded to establish a branch of my centre in Sweden, as no one had stepped forward, which we found could be a good candidate as director.

Then, in April 2016, Matteo Bruschetti, an Italian doctor working in Lund who had published 14 Cochrane reviews, contacted me after he had read an article questioning why there wasn't a Cochrane centre in Sweden. I wanted to ensure that I had the best candidate and therefore arranged an exploratory meeting in Lund on 27 June 2014. Another doctor was also interested in becoming the director, and there were other delicate issues to deal with also after the meeting, above all ensuring some funding that would make the branch possible.

One of the attendants, Yohan Robinson, was a busybody who caused us a lot of trouble. Without permission, he quickly established a website for the non-existing Swedish branch, www.cochrane.se, which redirected to his own site, <http://www.robinsonlab.se/>, and also a twitter account, <https://twitter.com/CochraneSweden>. Through these social media, he was contacted by several organisations and entities, including SBU (the Swedish Council for Health Technology Assessment), which worried us, as we expected they would see the new Swedish initiative as competition.

Although Bruschetti and I were on holiday, we needed to react immediately. I asked Bruschetti to ensure that all websites, twitter accounts or other things related to the Swedish branch would be taken down. I noted that the website said:

Start of the Swedish branch of the Nordic Cochrane Centre

The Swedish branch of the Nordic Cochrane Center will be established in Lund, under the co-directorship of Hanne Tønnesen and Matteo Bruschetti from Lund University. Christian Carrwik and Yohan Robinson from rLAB in Uppsala joined the startup meeting on June 27th, 2016, which was initiated by Nordic Cochrane Director Peter C. Gøtzsche. Proposed aims of the new Swedish Branch will be the promotion of systematic reviews for PhD studies, as well as establishing a contact network with government agencies for health policy work.

This was most embarrassing for us. It was not at all clear at this stage what would happen, and we needed to negotiate privately not publicly, to find out who would be the most appropriate director. I had made this very clear during our meeting, and I also wrote it in the minutes.

As we were on holiday, Bruschetti and I knew nothing about Robinson's unauthorised initiatives but learned about them from Wilson on 27 July, as they had spotted an unauthorised use of Cochrane's logo.

Robinson's wrong-doing continued. On 27 July he wrote to Julie Wood, a member of Wilson's staff, without copying anyone:

... There must have been some misunderstandings on my side on the process of establishing the Swedish Cochrane Center ... As you for sure know, proper communication and visibility in both press and social media is vital for the survival of startup non-profit organisations. During the few weeks since I started @CochraneSweden we have been developing contacts with the Swedish Medical Association leadership, the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment (SBU), and patient organisations. Cochrane has never been as active in Sweden before, and has never had an acceptance on this level. Therefore the continuation of our communication work is most important and will most likely lead to a stronger position of Cochrane in Sweden.

With regard to social media communications, are all Cochrane Twitter and Facebook accounts strategically organised from your desk with regard to placement of evidence based messages or news on courses etc.? Please come back to me as soon as I may officially resume activities on Twitter.

Chaos ensued. In her reply, Wood only copied Wilson, not us:

Please find attached the process for submitting to be a Cochrane branch (section 3.6). I appreciate your keenness to keep this moving and be part of the Cochrane community, but please understand that we can't have you communicating as a branch of Cochrane until this is approved. So in the meantime, just hold back on this account until this is approved. That would be greatly appreciated. Once this approval is completed, we will set you up with a proper logo, account, website (run on our platform and all branded up for you to just put in content) and work with your team to pull together an announcement, etc. as soon as it is approved. If there is any more I can do to help with this approvals process, please don't hesitate to ask, but I am sure Peter and his team at the Cochrane Nordic Centre will give you the support you need.

Wood made a number of errors, apart from not consulting with me or copying me. Without knowing what the situation was in Sweden, she thought that Robinson was the one who was going to set up the Swedish branch. She gave him documents about how a branch is being established, although she was fully aware that I of course knew this and had established several branches earlier. Further, she told him what would then happen, namely to set him up with a "proper logo, account, website" and also that "we will ... work with your team." It was us in Copenhagen that should work with the appropriate team, not Wilson's people in London, and Robinson did not even have a team.

On 8 August, Wilson wrote to Robinson:

Let me thank you, most sincerely, for your enthusiasm and willingness to support Cochrane's work by establishing a Cochrane Group in Sweden. As Julie has said, we are very excited by the prospect!

Further to Julie's message below, we are in a transition state because we have just finalized and approved the new functional and structural possibilities and arrangements for Cochrane's geographic (as opposed to thematic) Groups. I've attached for you the final paper and pages 14 and following (Sections 5 & 6) should be of particular importance for you as they set out the new arrangements that are now being implemented.

As part of this new situation we will be producing new templates for applicants who wish to set up a Cochrane Affiliate, Cochrane Associate Centre and Cochrane Centre. In most cases we anticipate that new Cochrane Groups like yours in Sweden begin as an Affiliate, but if the scale and scope of the resources and ambitions of a Group justify it, we would consider an application for a new Associate Centre. In the absence of this template now (though it will be issued soon) I also attach an example of a recent application to form a new Cochrane Group, in Taiwan. This will give you an idea of the information we require in considering an application.

Do not hesitate to be in touch with us if anything is unclear or you would like to discuss your proposal in more detail.

Mark did not consult with me before he wrote this email but he did copy me on it. The situation was now really messy. Wilson's misconception that Robinson should be the key person was surprising because I informed him on 27 July that the people we worked with were Bruschetti and Tønnesen.

Wilson, without consulting me, rewarded the troublemaker for his "efforts" and explained how he should move forward. He also interfered inappropriately with my affairs by saying that he would consider an application for

an Affiliate, which is less than an Associate Centre, and was never an option for Bruschetti, me or the participants at the meeting. We all wanted more than this.

On 9 August, Robinson responded to Wilson and caused even more trouble:

Thank you for your encouraging words. Sweden is still an underdeveloped country with regard to Cochrane reports and their dissemination. The establishment of a Cochrane Centre in Sweden will facilitate the involvement of more researchers in Cochrane projects.

Traditionally, in Sweden we are suspicious and unsupportive with regards to non-transparent, non-democratically managed organisations. Therefore I welcome the recent developments in the Cochrane leadership, which will allow for a greater acceptance of Cochrane in Sweden.

Thank you for sharing the Taiwan application. It is exemplarily well written and gives us an idea on the content and extent of a good Cochrane branch application. I will share it with our Cochrane Sweden development team Hanne and Matteo. I am looking forward to working with you in the future.

Robinson criticised the process, Bruschetti and I had agreed to follow; called our efforts non-transparent and non-democratic; and thought he would now work directly with Cochrane's CEO on this, bypassing Bruschetti and me.

On 15 August, my first day at work after my holidays, I tried to stop this mismanagement in an email to Wilson and Wood:

things have happened this summer beyond my control, as I was on holiday. Yohan Robinson has had no mandate whatsoever to act in the way he has, and this has been disruptive.

We are progressing very well. Please see the final minutes from our exploratory meeting in Lund attached and also a report on the events this summer that I have just finished this morning. Please don't get me wrong when you read my report. I have merely tried to summarise what happened so that we may all learn from it. Our collaboration and mutual support is very important.

For now, please don't write any emails to Yohan or anybody else in Sweden in relation to our work with establishing a Swedish branch. If you get any, just forward them to me, and I shall respond, copying you. I have explained in my report why this is important.

And please send me any emails you might have received, from Yohan or anybody else, and your responses to them in case I have not already been copied in so that I can understand better what went wrong this summer and might still go wrong if we are not careful. It is always very sensitive to establish a branch but I can tell you that everyone has welcomed the decisions I have taken so far, in agreement with those present at the meeting, and everyone got a chance to step forward at our meeting in Lund and say in what ways they might be interested in contributing to Cochrane. Which makes Yohan's actions all the more curious.

It took a while and many more emails before Robinson finally complied with our wishes. When the Swedish Associated Cochrane Centre had been officially approved, Wilson, who had had nothing to do with it apart from his screw ups, presented a photo of himself on the Cochrane webpage and his talk about the new centre: <https://www.cochrane.org/news/cochrane-launches-cochrane-sweden>

This is not what motivates other people. In his little talk, Wilson regrets he could not come to the opening of the Centre. He wasn't invited.