

Excerpts from: <https://therealrthorat.video.blog/2018/10/01/the-journey-begins/>

Some Thoughts on the Cochrane Mess

therealrthorat Uncategorized October 1, 2018

The modification of the Nordic Cochrane Centre's website without their permission was a blatant violation of the collaboration agreement between the centre and Cochrane. The message sent was: we have total authority and will do as we please. In my opinion, the remaining Cochrane Centres have a decision to make regarding the board's seizure of the Nordic Cochrane Centre's website. Do they want to acquiesce to this naked power grab? If a centre gets into a dispute with the board, are you prepared to have the board seize your website and deface it with statements from the board about your 'insubordination'?

The board has been misleading and/or dishonest throughout the entire process. At the end of the board's statement on the expulsion, it talks of "zero tolerance" and makes a vague nod toward the #metoo movement. They state there was repeated "seriously bad behavior" toward "staff members" and they had no choice to act. I have a hard time believing a lawyer approved this reckless statement. Some people got the impression Gotzsche had sexually harassed staff. This is not surprising, given the language.

The "harassment" Gotzsche is accused of is simple disagreement with the CEO and other members of the board. And in that disagreement, the board's own hired lawyer sided with Gotzsche on the allegations against him. Gotzsche also made allegations of misconduct against the CEO and the board chair. And that is the behavior deemed to be harassment. The "seriously bad behavior" is disagreeing with those who had the power to expel him and objecting to their behavior. So, when looked at through the facts on the ground, this appears to be the expulsion of a whistleblower arranged by those he accused of misconduct.

The board's statement also included this sentence: "The report completely exonerated the member of the Senior Management Team but did not exonerate the other individual." This is so misleading as to be false. And I assume they relied on the confidential nature of the report to conceal this deception. Now that Dr. Gotzsche has posted the report, everyone can see that Dr. Gotzsche was completely exonerated on the main issue: the accusations of violating the spokesperson policy.

If the government of Denmark wished to support the work of Cochrane and not specifically Nordic Cochrane, they would give their money to Cochrane itself. I do not think a funder of one of the centres would wish to be completely subject to the whims and priorities of Cochrane leadership. That is not how Cochrane works and never has been.

One of the responsibilities listed for a Cochrane Centre Director is: "Try to secure sufficient funding and in-kind support to allow the Cochrane Centre to deliver the functions set out for Centres and **its own activity plans**". That is an explicit statement that Centres have their own activity plans. Explicit recognition the board only has control over the director in relation to

Cochrane activities and implicitly means there are other activities of the Centre over which the board has no control.

This is also why the document does not give the board the authority to remove a Centre Director. Their remedies are limited to taking steps to remedy the breach – and those steps do not include removal of a director. If the situation becomes unworkable, they are permitted to deregister, relocate, or dissolve the Centre. All three of these options really just mean kicking the Centre out of Cochrane. They have no ability to modify the organizational structure of the Centre because it is independent.

The lawyer's review

The lawyer's review was not independent at all. This is expected, given the dynamics of the situation, and the lawyer chosen is clearly sharp, based on some of the things I read in the review. He knows the board's intention is to expel Gotzsche. So he goes to great pains to 1) provide a fig leaf to his client, and 2) completely distance himself from what they plan to do. It is clear he wants no part of any disciplinary action here. The lack of independence can be seen throughout the document.

Throughout the document he attributes motivations to the Cochrane CEO and board chair that he cannot possibly know. And those motivations are always positive ones. "...they were very well-intentioned". "I am satisfied that the Proposal advanced by MB was in good faith." "I am satisfied that MB is wholly impartial." "During my interview with him I was impressed with MB's obvious integrity and impartiality." "I should say here that over well in excess of four hours of interviews with MW I was impressed by his fairness, objectivity and open demeanour." "...MW has shown restraint and professionalism throughout." Except when he did not – in that case, where MW shouted at Gotzsche and called him a liar "I treat this as a minor issue." Ha ha. The assertive statements that the allegations are false are clearly biased statements. As are silly statements saying that "eminent" professors are not likely to lose their independence. Of course, we know eminent professors lose their independence all the time for various reasons – including their financial association with drug companies. Similarly, he rejects an allegation that meeting minutes were tampered with partly based on the fact they were sent to the co-chairs before approval. Surely, the co-chairs would have objected to incorrect minutes he says. Well, if the co-chairs have been antagonistic to Gotzsche and siding with the CEO during this conflict, does that point actually hold any water? No, it does not.

The absolute certainty with which he dismisses the allegations made by Gotzsche smacks of obvious bias and lack of independence.

The two recent complaints

1. Notably, no complaint was made about Dr. Gotzsche until two years after the trial. And this complaint was made after Dr. Gotzsche had filed a formal case against the physician with the disciplinary court. It is clear the complaint is motivated by anger and retaliation against Dr. Gotzsche for filing his complaint about the doctor's own despicable behavior.

2. First, asking a question privately on company letterhead does not seem like a “spokesperson” role at all. What is the idea he is conveying by asking this question? That Cochrane cares about dead children? Apparently the CEO of Cochrane feels it is essential to make sure everyone knows Cochrane takes no position on the issue of children dying in clinical trials.

Second, this complaint was not even about the spokesperson policy. This complaint was made on the basis that Gotzsche is “biased” and not an independent researcher, and that makes Cochrane look bad. Apparently, Fuller Torrey will not trust any Cochrane reviews after receiving an inquiry about dead children from a member of Cochrane.

But my larger issue with this complaint is the total lack of perspective here from Cochrane leadership. The complaint was clearly sour grapes, meant as intimidation. Aside from these sour grapes, Torrey is perhaps the leading proponent of forced treatment – the Treatment Advocacy Center he runs is dedicated to forced treatment, while Gotzsche has been leading a campaign against forced treatment. A normal, functioning complaint system at Cochrane would recognize this problem and dismiss the complaint (as it should have many others against Gotzsche). The Cochrane complaint process should not be a tool for harassment by people angry at a Cochrane director. That is what all these complaints are: harassment. And this is the very thing the board accused Gotzsche of doing. In the upside down world of the Cochrane board, the actual target of a years-long campaign of harassment is the guilty party. Sorry, but when you take seriously the claims of obvious harassers, you are yourself participating in harassment.

Threats of closing the Nordic Cochrane Centre

In what world does it make sense to threaten to close an entire Cochrane Centre because their director asked for information on how and why so many children died in a study? Who wants to be a part of an organization that prioritizes the letterhead used to ask questions over answers about dead children? Doctors frequently list the hospital they attend, and no one assumes the doctor is representing the hospital’s views.

Cochrane leadership and policy makes a big deal about having stricter rules for directors of centres, but we should be honest here: these rules were put in place to muzzle Dr. Gotzsche. They produce absurdities like Dr. Gotzsche is more restricted in how he can use Nordic Cochrane letterhead than his subordinates are.

Nordic Cochrane is an independent entity, Dr. Gotzsche is its director, and he is empowered to decide what is Nordic Cochrane business.

The board’s own lawyer even says these rules were misguided. Though he of course knows they were made in good faith. The Cochrane board is always acting in good faith, except maybe when they are misleading everyone as demonstrated above. I am sure the hired lawyer would call those “minor issues”.

The requirement is imposed instead to attempt to diminish Dr. Gotzsche’s authority and lessen his credibility. Have you ever seen someone affiliated with an organization specifically state before speaking that their views are not that of the organization? Rarely, if ever.

Possibly the worst aspect of this is the clear impression from Cochrane leaders such as the CEO, that the Cochrane centres have no autonomy and Cochrane leadership does not respect the existence of the collaboration agreements or the centres' ability to operate autonomously. This is clear from the statements by CEO Mark Wilson throughout the documents he sent to Dr. Gotzsche.

Gotzsche's obvious response to this was: these *are* the views of the Nordic Cochrane Centre. I am its director and I am authorized to speak on its behalf. The implication from Wilson's statement is that he see no difference between "Cochrane" and the Cochrane centers. It is as if the collaboration agreements do not exist.

Dr. Gotzsche's work makes him "controversial". The CEO of Cochrane is not a scientist. He comes from the business world. And in the business world, controversy is considered bad for the brand. And employees who rock the boat and do not fall in line with orders from above do not last long. Corporations are dictatorships, not democracies. The CEO brought a dictatorial mindset to Cochrane, and he believes Gotzsche is bad for the "brand". Not being a scientist, he has no recognition that the work Gotzsche does IS the brand. The ideal of science is not sitting by idly while science is perverted by moneyed interests. The ideal is someone who thoroughly vets the science being produced and is willing to challenge corruption at great personal risk. So, in the CEO's mind, any appearance of the Cochrane name next to Dr. Gotzsche is bad for the brand.

That process [the so-called independent legal review paid for by Cochrane] failed, but leadership went ahead with the expulsion anyway, trampling all sorts of rules and agreements in the process to get its way. And misleading Cochrane's members about what it had done. In my opinion, this all became inevitable with the centralization of power in Cochrane. The executive staff of Cochrane was given ultimate authority. Once power was centralized, it was inevitable that Cochrane central would seek to claim more power. This always occurs.

One oddity in the whole arrangement is that Cochrane's "brand" was largely built by the centres. At some point, it was decided the brand that was created by the centres needed to be centrally managed. And this new management had no moral authority, yet was tasked with telling the centres how best to build the brand they already built. While at the same time providing almost nothing back to the centres. I think the centres see the relationship as parasitic and one-sided, and I cannot blame them.

A corporate power structure does not work for a scientific organization like Cochrane. For one thing, corporations operate more like dictatorships than democracies. Dissenting voices are squeezed out, not respected. A corporate structure is exactly what powerful interests like pharmaceutical companies want at Cochrane. Because corporations will move quickly to remove people they deem controversial. Eventually you are left with subservient people who fill out the forms and publish the work without asking the difficult questions. Many studies are already produced in a check box manner, where companies are sure to cross off every technical requirement while producing a biased design that results in the desired outcome. Their ideal world would include a Cochrane that produces meta-analysis the same way. Check off all the boxes. Do not ask any difficult questions, just publish the free marketing materials.