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Translated by Pierre Biron

Medical Science Integrity Has Just Been Decapitated

Every day, doctors make diagnostic and therapeutic decisions. As they practice scientific medicine, they must rely on medical literature passed on via continuing education and clinical practice guidelines. The problem is that this medical literature is so abundant that it has become impossible to digest. This gave birth to an international network of independent collaborators founded in 1993 by British doctor Iain Chalmers, a pioneer, based on the work of Archibald Cochrane, which established rules for evaluating and validating new medical interventions and practices.

Non-profit, independent and transparent, the Cochrane Collaboration became one of the most trusted scientific institutions to analyze this literature and inform healthcare professionals. More than ten thousand collaborators in over one hundred countries are assembled in about fifty review groups. In the last two decades, the more than seven thousand systematic reviews methodically produced were considered authoritative.

Peter Gøtzsche, one of the network's co-founders, has also founded the Nordic Cochrane Centre, located at Rigshospitalet, the Copenhagen University Hospital. Over the years, he became one of the most respected experts of his time for his critical evaluation of clinical trials and his denunciation of the corruption of knowledge by healthcare industries, leading to controversial screening programmes, abuse of psychotropic drugs, lax regulations, tolerance of exorbitant prices, and a code of silence surrounding the adverse effects of new products.

Gøtzsche has published two challenging books, *Deadly Medicines and Organized Crime* and *Deadly Psychiatry and Organized Denial*. He has also noted that authors of Cochrane reviews (limited to published clinical trials mainly funded by the manufacturers) may include people with financial conflicts of interest and, above all, sometimes avoid taking into account unpublished negative trials, field investigations, well-founded criticisms, and reports of serious harms.

Meanwhile, Cochrane's London-based governance has accepted more than one million dollars from a private foundation interested in pharmaceutical development. This illustrates a major corporatist, centralizing, and conservative turn for the institution. Industrial and professional lobbies kick into gear and swear that one day they will get rid of the damaging whistleblower. Well, they finally had his head on a platter.

In September 2018, the Cochrane governance brutally dismissed Gøtzsche from their Board, and soon after the university hospital where he ran his Nordic Cochrane Centre followed suit and fired him. Such savage evictions have never been seen in these circles before. They resulted in shock and consternation; more than ten thousand Cochrane associates (including founder Iain Chalmers), academics and patients clamoured for his rehabilitation.

This recent victim of institutional corruption defends himself with uncommon courage in a devastating book—certainly the book of the year in medical ethics [1]. If Cochrane persists in this path, then academic independence, freedom of expression in science, and the quality of your doctor's next prescription are at stake. Academics here and everywhere must show their indignation and avoid behaving like a lookout on the Titanic bridge who would not sound the alarm.

Signed: Pierre Biron, Jean-Claude St-Onge, Geneviève Rail.

Co-signatory doctors: Louise Authier, Robert Béliveau, Bernard Dugré, Marie-Claude Goulet, René Lavigneur, Maurice Leduc, Paul van Nguyen, Jacques Thivierge.

[1] Gøtzsche, Peter C. (2019). *Death of a Whistleblower and Cochrane's Moral Collapse*. Copenhagen: People's Press.