

Book review

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Cochrane is sinking!

The research network Cochrane once stood for independence and credibility. The dismissal of Danish professor Peter C. Gøtzsche in September 2018 was the last nail in Cochrane's reputation chest. *Death of a whistleblower and Cochrane's moral collapse* is Gøtzsche's defense. It gives insight into a reality so absurd that one gets associations to a mixture of medieval witch-hunts and show trials against people who were undesirable by the regime in the Stalin era in the Soviet Union.

For years, many people have regarded Cochrane as credible and quality assured. Recent years' events involving some poor scientific reviews and the process around Gøtzsche have gradually changed this. The credibility suffered a tragic blow when Gøtzsche was fired from Cochrane after a Kafkaesque process. In future, many will look with scepticism at Cochrane articles. What should we think of an organisation led by a handful of "power-hungry bandits"?

Many may feel these are strong words, but those who read *Death of a whistleblower and Cochrane's moral collapse* will probably acknowledge that the description reflects reality. In his book, Gøtzsche systematically goes through all the cases that gradually tightened the web around him, causing him to no longer be wanted in Cochrane - neither on the board nor in the organisation - followed by a dismissal from Rigshospitalet (the Danish National Hospital) on January 31, 2019. Most of what he writes can be documented by written and oral sources, including transcripts of what was actually said in various contexts. For people who wish to verify this, all the documents have been uploaded on Gøtzsche's website (www.deadlymedicines.dk/). Parts of the material are of a personal nature, but it was not posted until he was fired. It is necessary to gain insight into all the documents if you want to understand the background to the process against Gøtzsche. Although the case is fresh, I am confident that it will become part of the history of science, where Gøtzsche is the martyr who held the science banner high while the management of Cochrane represented commercial interests that did not want free, independent research.

What the case is about

The core of the Gøtzsche case is about how Cochrane should be managed and function. Gøtzsche co-founded the Cochrane Collaboration - as it was then called - and has been key to developing it into a respected research network. Cochrane has previously stood for transparency, credibility, independence and freedom from financial ties to commercial interests such as the vaccine industry, the pharmaceutical industry or medical device manufacturers. The collaboration functioned as a grassroots organisation on a voluntary basis, where researchers in a number of countries contributed review articles on various topics relevant to medicine. These have been widely used by doctors and health authorities to make decisions on medical issues, and Cochrane has therefore been an important health policy premise provider in the debate. Although Cochrane is comprised of a number of local centres in different countries and has over 10,000 members, some researchers have contributed more than others. Gøtzsche is one of them, and he is perceived by many as the very personification of Cochrane because he has helped to build it up in so many ways. At the same time, he is fearless and clear on behalf of science and has maintained a high media profile. He is one of Denmark's best-known researchers and is respected in research circles all over the world. Gøtzsche can also be characterised as Cochrane's "watchdog" and the conscience of the organisation.

His counterpart in Cochrane and the book's "main villain" is journalist Mark Wilson. When he got the job as top executive of the organisation in 2012, he had completely different views than the founders. Wilson developed a close collaboration with the director of the UK Cochrane Centre, since they had common ideas about how the organisation should develop. They wanted a clearer organisational structure, stronger leadership from the top, centralisation of a number of functions previously held by the regional centres, and to develop Cochrane more into a knowledge business. As part of this, the organisation changed its name from the more apt "Cochrane Collaboration" to the "Cochrane" brand. In addition, they have allowed that a certain proportion of authors of Cochrane reviews may have financial ties to the industry. Wilson assembled a small group of loyal executives who worked to achieve his goals.

Virtually no researchers in Cochrane were satisfied with the management, and the one who has most often and clearly gone against it was precisely the fearless and outspoken Gøtzsche. He has therefore been a thorn in the eye of the management, which over the years made life increasingly sour for him. Gøtzsche says in the book that for years he was regularly bullied by Wilson and documents this with quotes and explanations of the course of events. In my opinion, there is little doubt that a lawsuit would give Gøtzsche redress.

Strong counter-forces

For years, Gøtzsche's research has focused on topics of great importance to the pharmaceutical industry. It has strongly disliked this troublesome researcher who through independent analyses put their products in a worse light than the industry's PR campaigns and "hand-picked" research indicates. When Gøtzsche in book form documented that the pharmaceutical industry functions as an organised criminal network,^{1,2} he did not exactly become more popular. In addition, when he documented major problems with psychiatry and that the psychiatrists in total do more harm than good with their drug treatments,^{3,4,5} he became unpopular in yet another powerful group, this time the world's psychiatrists.

Gøtzsche's last drop, which caused the Cochrane management's cup to run over, was the article his research group at the Nordic Cochrane Centre in Copenhagen published on the evaluation of vaccines against cervical cancer – the HPV vaccines.⁶ By then, other researchers in Cochrane had already published a review⁷ that in reality gave the vaccine an approving pat on the shoulder. Gøtzsche's group had access to far more and more reliable data and came to a completely different and more critical conclusion about these vaccines. Thus, Gøtzsche challenged both the powerful vaccine industry and other researchers in Cochrane, and this obviously provoked the Cochrane leadership greatly.

Gøtzsche does not write this explicitly, but it seems likely that for many years the Cochrane management has been under intense pressure from both the pharmaceutical industry, the vaccine industry and the psychiatric guild. Alternatively, it could be that Mark Wilson was "planted" in the job to develop Cochrane to become more industry friendly. Regardless of what might be right, Gøtzsche documents how Wilson evolved over time to become increasingly dictatorial and that central management seemed immune to all kinds of criticism. Although many researchers in Cochrane reacted negatively to Wilson and some quit their jobs, Gøtzsche was alone to openly take on the fight. He was elected to the Cochrane Governing Board. The same board held a farcical hearing and deposed him in September 2018, prompting four other council members to resign in protest. The process triggered an outcry throughout the scientific world, and Gøtzsche has received massive support from leading scientists.

The book describes the entire process against Gøtzsche over many years, including what he was accused of and what actually happened. We get to know who supported him and who criticised and

even stabbed him in the back. An important question is what the whole process means for Cochrane's future as a trustworthy research network. The dismissal of Gøtzsche from both Cochrane's board and the research network itself has major implications for people's perception of Cochrane, for medical research, and especially for patients who no longer have an independent research watchdog at their disposal.

Evaluation

When I got his book onto the PC, my first impulse was: Should I spend time reading an entire book on a topic where I have already made up my mind about who is right? Since *Helsemagasinet* stands behind Gøtzsche in this matter,⁸ I was very much in doubt whether I should spend time reading the book, but at least I could browse some pages. Then, I became absorbed in the story of one more bizarre incident after the other.

Gøtzsche has a good and engaging pen. He is also clear in his assessments and characteristics, and those who have harassed him for years get their passports stamped with clear text. Gøtzsche sticks to the point and spices the analyses with quotes from philosophers and others who have studied power - which strategies are effective for winning, regardless of who is right. Gøtzsche is an honest researcher who in all respects emphasises the facts of the case and what is documented. However, in the long run, you are doomed to lose in the face of cynical power men. The amazing fact is that Gøtzsche has not collapsed under the inhuman pressure he has been under for so long. However, he has been out in severe weather before and does not let himself be cowed. Nor did he accept to be "bought" into silence at the dismissal from Rigshospitalet.

Gøtzsche is an incorruptible and reliable professional and person. He has not only criticised the work of his research colleagues - a normal and desirable part of the research process - but also the pharmaceutical industry and established psychiatric practice - something not all dare to do. That is not how you become popular, and many people follow with Argus eyes what Gøtzsche writes and does. A slightest glitch would result in tremendous attention and media coverage. However, Gøtzsche is known *not* to be mistaken. Therefore, for decades he has gained a reputation as an eminent and fearless researcher who also has the heart in the right place in the encounter with abuse against patients. He tells about mistakes, dishonesty and injustice, no matter who feels hurt in the process.

One can get sad on behalf of medical science by reading such a book. Here, an honest top scientist has spent an enormous amount of time defending himself against power-hungry people in the central management of Cochrane. Imagine what important research he could have done during the same time if it hadn't been for all this!

Gøtzsche notes on the title page of the book: "A wrong leader can destroy what 10,000 people have built up patiently over 20 years." In line with this, he dedicates the book to the more than 10,000 volunteers who represent the research network Cochrane. The book clearly explains why the top management in Cochrane should be replaced immediately by reputable people who are faithful to the organisation's morals and original principles. Such a new leadership would be of great importance to medical research and current and future patients worldwide. Cochrane should continue to be a network of independent researchers, not a centrally controlled knowledge business with industry ties.

Gøtzsche's defense provides important insights into the process of his dismissal and Cochrane's moral decay. It regularly reminds us of the ideals of science and what we should strive for. This is especially important in a time when media and people who hold the power characterise what they do not like as "fake news" or "conspiracy theories." Gøtzsche has become a martyr in the fires of commercial interests, but everyone can help restore his honour by participating in the fight for more

credible and independent medical research.

About the book author

Peter C. Gøtzsche (b. 1949) holds a master's degree in biology and chemistry (1974), became a physician in 1984 and is a specialist in internal medicine. He worked for the pharmaceutical industry 1975–83, both as a sales representative and product manager, before getting jobs at hospitals in Copenhagen (1984–95). Gøtzsche co-founded the Cochrane Collaboration in 1993⁹ and established the Nordic Cochrane Centre the same year. He became professor of clinical research design and analysis at the University of Copenhagen in 2010.

Gøtzsche has authored over 75 research articles in the "big five" medical journals (*BMJ*, *Lancet*, *JAMA*, *Annals of Internal Medicine* and *the New England Journal of Medicine*) and four pivotal academic books. Error! Bookmark not defined.,Error! Bookmark not defined.,10,11,12 His scientific works have been cited over 50,000 times.

He has a particular interest in statistics and research methodology and has written numerous analyses and comments in professional journals on problems related to the pharmaceutical industry, especially about drug studies.

Illustrations

Book Cover Facsimile

Photo of Peter C. Gøtzsche

Caption:

Author: Peter C. Gøtzsche

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Sources:

¹ Gøtzsche PC. Deadly medicines and organised crime. London: Radcliffe Publishing, 2013.

² Mysterud I. Skremmende om farmasøytisk industri. VOF 2014; 5 (3): 80–3.

³ Gøtzsche PC. Psykiatri på avveie. VOF 2014; 5 (5): 10–5.

⁴ Gøtzsche PC. Deadly psychiatry and organized denial. Copenhagen: People's Press, 2013.

⁵ Mysterud I. På pasientenes side mot psykiatrien. VOF 2016; 7 (2): 38–43.

⁶ Jørgensen L, Gøtzsche PC, Jefferson T. The Cochrane HPV vaccine review was incomplete and ignored important evidence of bias. *BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine* 2018; 23: 165–8.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30054374>.

⁷ Arbyn M, Xu L, Simoens C, et al. Prophylactic vaccination against human papillomaviruses to prevent cervical cancer and its precursors. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2018; nr. 5: CD009069. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29740819>.

⁸ Mysterud I. Cochrane, HPV-vaksiner og Peter C. Gøtzsche – en tragisk prosess. VOF 2019; 10 (2): 82–7.

⁹ <http://www.cochrane.org/>.

¹⁰ Wulff HR, Gøtzsche PC. Rationel klinik: Evidensbaserede diagnostiske og terapeutiske beslutninger. 5. udgave. København: Munksgaard, 2006.

¹¹ Gøtzsche PC. Rational diagnosis and treatment: Evidence-based clinical decision-making. 4th edition. Chichester: Wiley, 2007.

¹² Gøtzsche PC. Mammography screening: Truth, lies and controversy. London: Radcliffe, 2012.