



The Cochrane Library is now freely available to all New Zealanders

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The Cochrane Collaboration was established just under 13 years ago and has now grown into a large international network of 13,000 individuals from 91 countries. The aim of the organisation is to “help people make well-informed decisions about health care by preparing, maintaining, and promoting the accessibility of systematic reviews of the effects of healthcare interventions”. The production of Cochrane reviews has continued at an impressive rate over the last few years with, on average, 350 new reviews being added each year; almost 1 new review per day! At the time of writing the total number of Cochrane Reviews is 2608 with 1592 further reviews in progress with their published protocols available.

The second part of the Collaboration’s mission statement is about the accessibility of Cochrane reviews. The reviews are published in The Cochrane Library which has been available in two formats: CD ROM updated four times per year and via Internet access. Whilst the abstracts and synopses of Cochrane reviews are available free on the Internet, access to the full reviews and other databases in The Cochrane Library has been restricted to subscribers; either individual or institutional. This has proved to be a significant financial barrier for many health professionals and most consumers, with a yearly subscription costing in the region of \$NZ380.

Over the last few years some governments have chosen to negotiate a national license for their citizens making the full content available free in the public domain. The first of these countries was Ireland in February 2002. Australia has had a national license since October 2002 and it has been renewed in late 2005 for a further 2 years. Several other (mainly European) countries have also provided public domain access for their citizens and the Cochrane Library is also available to developing countries through the Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI).

In the latter part of 2005, a national license to The Cochrane Library was negotiated for all New Zealanders. The license has been confirmed for 3 years and was jointly funded by the Ministry of Health and DHBNZ.

Any individual with Internet access from a New Zealand computer IP address can obtain full-text access at www.thecochranelibrary.com or via the website for the New Zealand Branch of The Australasian Cochrane Centre at www.cochrane.org.nz

The decision to place the access to The Cochrane Library in New Zealand in the public domain is a significant one and quite rightly makes the same health information available to consumers and health professionals alike.

In addition to the Cochrane Database of Cochrane Systematic Reviews, The Cochrane Library also contains several other databases of health information. These include the DARE database of other non-Cochrane systematic reviews, Health Technology reviews, reviews of economic analyses (NHS EED), and CENTRAL, the largest repository of randomised controlled trials with 470,139 entries in the latest issue of

the Library. Searches for health information will yield "hits" in each of these databases at the same time. There is also a database of systematic review methodology and information about the Cochrane Collaboration itself and its individual entities.

This is an extraordinary, rapidly-enlarging health information resource which contains so much information that the CD version is now delivered on four CDs.

There are real issues about the useability of The Cochrane Library. The Collaboration has insisted on a similar format for all protocols and reviews and the format is rather "dry" reading particularly for health and disability consumers. The reviews do contain a synopsis for ease of reading, and the Cochrane Consumer Network provides tailored consumer summaries. The Collaboration is debating ways of making the health information contained with Cochrane Reviews more accessible and useable to the multiple users and readers of the reviews. This may include producing derivative products of the reviews to make them more accessible to health professionals and consumers.

Making the content of The Cochrane Library freely available is an important contribution to the lofty goal of achieving "universal access to essential healthcare information by 2015".¹ The challenge now is for all New Zealanders to begin accessing and using the vast store of health information available in The Cochrane Library so that long-term access to this resource becomes part our health information culture and not discarded after 3 years.

Our country is well placed to demonstrate how widely this resource can be used, with the proportion of New Zealanders (76.3%) who have access to the Internet being the second highest in the World.² The Cochrane Library needs to be widely promoted so that it becomes one of the first "ports of call" for health information before resorting to other general search engines.

Colleagues are also invited to contribute to the work done by the Cochrane Collaboration by contacting the New Zealand Cochrane Fellow, Dr Vanessa Jordan, at v.jordan@auckland.ac.nz

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