Cochrane Colorectal Cancer Group (CCCG)

TIPS for PEER REFEREES

Peer review of protocols and reviews

Introduction: CCCG is a Cochrane Review Group (CRG) within the international Cochrane Collaboration (CC); an organisation committed to inform about health care practice through the production of systematic reviews. The scopes of a CRG focus on a broad range of medical topics including specific clinical areas, education, behaviour, finance, and organisational and regulatory interventions.

The specific scopes of the CCCG comprise colorectal- and anal cancer, small bowel cancer, appendicitis, diverticulitis, hernias and benign anal diseases.

The development of systematic reviews is one of the main purposes and responsibilities of the group. An important step in developing systematic reviews includes feedback from specialists in order to edit and comment on protocols/reviews and to make sure that the high scientific standard is maintained throughout the process. Therefore, during the developing process of a Cochrane review, *the peer-referee holds a key position*.

Three stages: The systematic review is generally submitted in three stages, a title - a protocol - a completed review, of which the editorial process, including peer review, covers the two latter. To ensure a reasonable progress for all parties involved, the CCCG editorial office has outlined some practical approaches regarding evaluation and resubmission of protocols and reviews in agreement with the guide to the format of a Cochrane review ([Cochrane Handbook 2008](#)).

Quality of work in all steps is important, but particularly the *revision of the protocol* has a high priority, since this process is the basis for data synthesis and conclusions.

Appointment of key-editor and peer referees: CCCG appoints one key-editor and two peer referees to each review. The editorial comments are sent back to the CCCG editorial office from where they are forwarded to the key-editor, who has to compile a synthesis that is then passed on to the authors to act upon.
Differences among referees' critiques should be elucidated and reconciled whenever possible. Potential mechanisms to use reconciliation of different critiques are arbitration by one or more of the editors within the group or alternatively the use of an additional independent referee.

Peer review ensures that protocols and reviews published in the Cochrane Library are of a high standard. As a general rule, CCCG requests the appointed peer referees to *report back as soon as possible* whether they can commit themselves to the review process on this particular review.

The peer referee's considerations: Is the topic within my special field of interest? Can I afford the time? Are there other factors that may delay the revision process (holidays, travel, heavy work load etc.)? Hours of editorial work involved in a single review are not easy to measure out exactly, because each protocol/review is special and the subjects may vary in volume and/or complexity.

Protocol questionnaire, review questionnaire and accompanying letter: Peer review comprises evaluation of the protocol and the review. Within CCCG, the assessment of a

protocol/review is preferable twofold. One is the protocol or review questionnaire and the second is an accompanying letter, clarifying the areas of weakness and an overall opinion.

The *protocol or review questionnaires* cover the recommended items that should be included in a systematic Cochrane review and is meant as an intern help to the peer referee, however, please add any comments you may find relevant for the protocol. You can download the questionnaires from the CCCG website at: www.cccg.cochrane.org

Reviewing the protocol: CCCG ask you to evaluate and comment on the *methodology*, the *search strategy* for identification of trials, and the *language* as well as the *scope* (which has to be within the scope of CCCG) of the first draft of the protocol. The protocol questionnaire includes a checklist of frequently asked questions for this process.

Special attention is to be drawn to:
- The review title that should address a specific and unambiguous question
- Background and objectives
- Criteria for inclusion of studies
- Outcome measures (table of comparisons if submitted)

We appreciate a general comment on the protocol, covering the topics mentioned above.

Your comments should be returned to the CCCG Editorial Office within *3 weeks upon receipt.*

The evaluated protocol is returned to the author for final revision according to your comments. The author is asked to comment on major corrections in the revised protocol in a covering letter, which is sent to you.

When CRG has amended the protocol, the editor will revalue and return it once again to the CCCG for final acceptance/rejection. This revision will be done within two weeks upon receipt.

Reviewing the review: The referees receive the review in draft for evaluation and comments, which are sent to key editor for overall evaluation before final approval of the systematic review.

Special attention is to be drawn to:
- Statistical methods
- Discussion
- Conclusions
- If notified implications, are they practical and valid?

In some cases, where the differences of opinion amongst the editors are large, correspondence between the editors may be necessary. The CCCG coordinates this correspondence. The review questionnaire covers the relevant questions to be asked in the review process.

The revised review and comments should be returned to the CCCG editorial office *within 4 weeks upon receipt*.

When the author(s) has amended the review, the editor is supposed to revalue and return it once again to CCCG for final acceptance. As with the protocol, a covering letter from the author should clarify modifications according to your comments. You can either ask to revise the review again after the authors' modifications or leave it up to the key-editor. If you wish to go through it again, the *final editorial revision should be done within two weeks.*

After final approval by the editor/peer referees, the review is published in the Cochrane Library.

Please consult the flowchart of process and important deadlines to meet below.

Flowchart of process and important deadlines to meet

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│        Proposal from CCCG to peer referee          │
│  Peer referee declines/accepts as soon as possible │
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│          Peer reviewing of the protocol            │
│          Deadline: 3 weeks upon receipt            │
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│           Peer reviewing of the review             │
│           Deadline: 4 weeks upon receipt           │
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│  If requested by peer referee: final revision after │
│           authors' final amendment                 │
│           Deadline: 2 weeks upon receipt           │
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│         Publication of review in Cochrane Library  │
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