

Decision making the Cochrane way

by: Nancy Santesso

Ever needed to make a decision about starting a medication and wanted to know what the research says and read that one study showed it worked and another showed it didn't? It can be frustrating determining which study to believe and deciding whether to start the medication. It can also be frustrating for your doctor deciding which drug to recommend. And it can be frustrating for government deciding which drug to cover. The Cochrane Musculoskeletal Group of the Cochrane Collaboration is helping with the decision-making.

What is Cochrane?

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international non-profit organization that was established to ensure that patients, physicians, researchers and policy makers have reliable information to make decisions about treatments. The Collaboration is made up primarily of 50 groups around the world that focus on reviewing the medical literature about a specific disease. Each group produces, maintains and updates research reports (called systematic reviews) of the effects of health care treatments for a disease. The members of the Cochrane Musculoskeletal Group (CMSG), including consumers, health care professionals and researchers, write systematic reviews about treatments for musculoskeletal diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, lupus and gout.

How does the CMSG provide reliable information?

The reliability of the systematic reviews depends on how the review is done. The process ensures the reviews are relevant, thorough, high quality, unbiased, useful, current and available.

Relevant

The Coordinator of the group often sends out surveys asking people with musculoskeletal diseases, doctors and researchers in the area what treatments are of most interest.

Thorough and of High Quality

The review is 'systematic' because the authors must follow strict methods. The authors must find all of the research available about a treatment. They must also look for studies that use rigorous procedures, such as randomised controlled trials - the most rigorous type of study testing the effectiveness of treatments.

Unbiased, Useful and Current

The authors use statistical analysis to pull together the results from the individual studies into one "bottom line" result. The analysis ensures that they do not make conclusions about a treatment based on their own personal beliefs. Those conclusions are then applied to a person with a musculoskeletal disease, to the practice of a doctor or to a future research agenda. The reviews are also updated almost every two years.

Available

The CMSG reviews are available in three places on the Internet.

1. The Cochrane Library (<http://www.update-software.com/Cochrane/>) is a database that includes all the systematic reviews produced by all the groups of the Cochrane Collaboration. With a subscription, you can search the Library to find systematic reviews of therapies for arthritis.

The abstracts of arthritis reviews are available, without a subscription at <http://www.cochrane.org/cochrane/revabstr/g050index.htm>.

2. The CMSG has also developed consumer summaries of their systematic reviews written in lay language. To date, there are about 45 summaries freely available at the Arthritis Society web site at http://www.arthritis.ca/look_at_research/cochrane_reviews/. There you can find the bottom lines about treatments such as infliximab (Remicade) for rheumatoid arthritis, exercise for fibromyalgia or risedronate for osteoporosis.

3. If you would like more information about Cochrane or the CMSG, you may visit <http://www.cochrane.org>, <http://www.cochranemsk.org> or contact Maria Judd at mjudd@uottawa.ca or Nancy Santesso at santesso@uottawa.ca.

