

General Practitioners use of the Cochrane Library in London

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Abstract

Aim
To investigate the use of the Cochrane Library by general practitioners (GPs) in London.

Method
We conducted a postal questionnaire survey of general practices in South London. Two hundred and eighty-seven questionnaires were posted in December 2001 to all general practices in the South London region. All addresses beginning with either a SE or SW postcode were sent a two-page questionnaire with a covering letter.

Results
The response rate was 30%, with 33% of GPs having ever used the Cochrane Library and 67% that had not previously used the library. General practitioners that reported to have used the Cochrane Library used it only occasionally and found the library to be user friendly as well as being a useful source of information. However, 52% of GPs had never heard or used the Cochrane Library, and most reported poor publicity, awareness and time constraints as the major reasons for their lack of use.

Conclusions
The Cochrane Library of systematic reviews is a considered a user-friendly and useful source of evidence-base information. However, the utilisation and uptake of the Cochrane Library by GPs in South London is poor. Further resources are required to improve utilisation and increase awareness of this important source of evidence in primary care.

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Introduction
The Cochrane Collaboration is an international network of individuals and institutions, which evolved to prepare systematic, periodic reviews of good quality clinical trials. Individual trials may be too small to answer questions on the effects of health care interventions. Systematic reviews, which include all relevant studies, reduce bias and increase the statistical power to determine if a treatment is effective or not. With the exponential growth of medical literature (over two million articles published annually), systematic reviews help to condense information down to make it more manageable. The Cochrane Collaboration is organised into more than 50 review groups throughout the world with thousands of people contributing to the work of the Collaboration daily. More information about the Cochrane Collaboration, including abstracts of completed reviews can be found on the Cochrane Collaboration website (www.cochrane.org).

In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service Research & Development (NHS R&D) program has been providing financial support for the work of the Cochrane Collaboration for a number of years. It is therefore imperative to investigate to what extent the work of the Collaboration (CD-ROM library of

systematic reviews and reviews of effectiveness) is being utilised. It is important to know if the medical evidence collected and reviewed by the Cochrane Collaboration is utilised by primary care doctors, who are the health professionals most often seen by members of the general public.

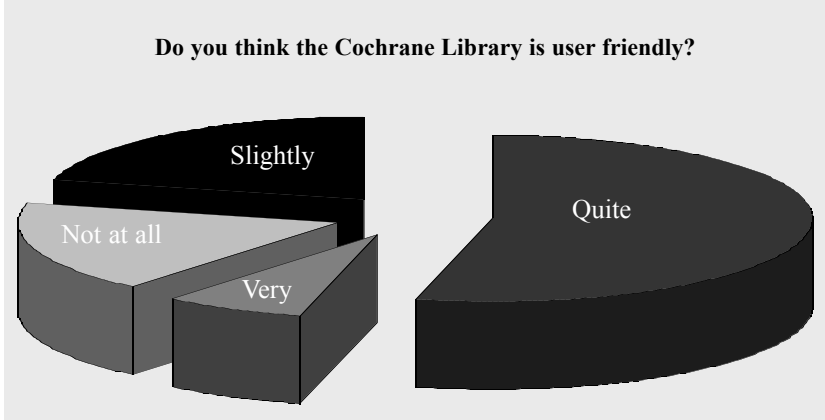
Objectives
To estimate the use of the Cochrane Library among GPs in South London by conducting a postal questionnaire survey.

Methods
A two-page questionnaire with 11 questions was sent out with a cover letter to 287 general practices in the South London region. The general practice postal addresses were obtained from the Local NHS website link of the Department of Health website (<http://www.doh.gov.uk/>). All addresses beginning with either a SE or SW postcode were abstracted from this NHS website and entered into a database for the purpose of the questionnaire.

Results
At the end of March 2002 the response rate was 30% (86) from the 287 posted questionnaires. Thirty-three percent (28) of GPs had used the Cochrane Library previously and 67% (58) had never used the Cochrane Library.

Of the GPs that had used the Cochrane Library previously, 85% had used the Cochrane Library seldom or occasionally. Fifty-four percent of GPs found the information on the Cochrane Library quite user friendly, 7% found it very user friendly, 21% found it only slightly user friendly while 18% did not find it user friendly at all (Figure 1). Fifty-three percent of GPs found the information contained on the Cochrane Library quite useful, 36% found it very useful and 11% found the information only slightly or not at all useful. Most GPs (44%) had used the Cochrane Library for patient management, 43% for study or research purposes and 10% used it to help prepare for presentations or seminars. The majority of GPs (75%) had used the Cochrane Library for either the database of completed systematic

Figure 1: User friendliness of the Cochrane Library as reported by general practitioners in South London.



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reviews or the reviews of effectiveness. Only 15% of GPs had used the Cochrane trials register on the Cochrane Library. The most useful sections of the library were reported by 87% of GPs to be the database of reviews and reviews of effectiveness. The most frequently used section of a Cochrane review on the library was the abstract (43%) followed by the use of the whole review (26%), synopsis (20%) and conclusions (11%). Most GPs (82%) rated the standard of the reviews on the Cochrane Library as either good or excellent, with 14% rating the Cochrane Library as adequate and 4% as poor (Figure 2).

Of the 58 GPs that had not used the library before 52% had never heard of the Cochrane Library previously. Thirty-one percent of GPs did not utilise the Cochrane Library due to time constraints, 9% were aware of the Cochrane Library but did not understand its usefulness, 5% had claimed to have no use for the Cochrane Library and 3% of GPs provided other explanations for not using the Cochrane Library. These included search strategy on the Cochrane Library being too difficult; practice used alternative sources of evidence and used only print journals. GPs that responded no previous use of the Cochrane Library were given the opportunity to comment on how their use of the Cochrane Library could be improved. Eleven percent wanted better access facilities, 24% requested further information on the Cochrane Library and 25% suggested seminars on the use of the Cochrane Library in order to increase publicity and awareness.

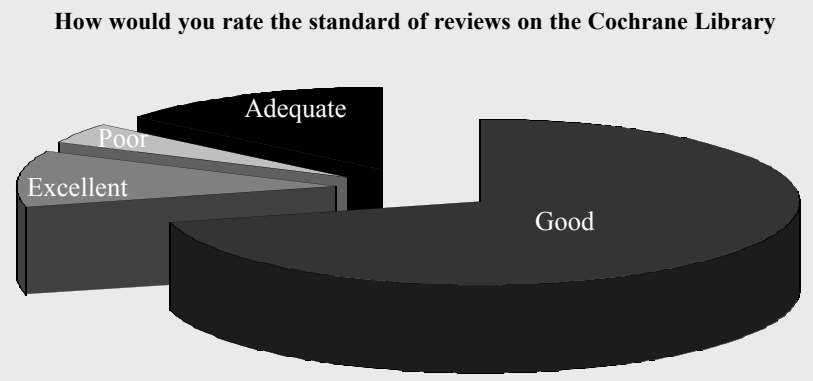
Discussion

The Cochrane Library of systematic reviews is considered a user-friendly and useful source of evidence-base information for only a handful of GPs in South London. The majority of GPs that have previously used the Cochrane Library found the standard of the reviews on the library of good quality. However, the use and uptake of the Cochrane Library by GPs in South London is poor. A survey published in 1998¹ that was conducted in the former Wessex region (South England) showed that the rate of use of the Cochrane Library by GPs was 4% (11/284 respondents). A year later, an Australian survey² reported the rate of use among GPs to be 10% (13/134 respondents). It is encouraging to learn from the current survey that the rate of use of the Cochrane Library in London by GPs is 33% (28/86 respondents). This higher figure compared to the Wessex region survey could be due to the greater availability of the Cochrane Library within the UK health sector over the years.

The response rate of 30% for our postal questionnaire was small this is not surprising as response rates to questionnaire surveys among GPs are dropping.³ However, it is likely that the GPs that returned the questionnaire would have actually heard of the existence of the Cochrane Library, whether they had used it or not. Therefore, it is possible that we have overestimated the rate of use of the Cochrane Library in general practice.

The main reason for not using the Cochrane Library was lack of awareness or publicity. Most of the GPs requested further information in way of seminars to be held in their area and or written information to be sent by post or

Figure 2: Standard of systematic reviews on the Cochrane Library as rated by general practitioners in South London.



email. Another important reason for not having ever used the library was time constraints. This finding suggests that in order to increase utilisation of the Cochrane Library and or other resources of evidence based medicine in general practice, information should be available in the clinic within a short time. Such information could be provided by an independent source much like support for biochemistry or pathology services.

Conclusions

Large amounts of the UK NHS R&D funding support the work of the Cochrane Collaboration in the UK. Therefore, although there has been an encouraging increase in the rate of use of the Cochrane Library it is important to further increase the utilisation of the work of the Collaboration by GPs, not only in South London but also throughout the UK. In this age of "evidence-based medicine" it is important that GPs are aware of such an important source of evidence, which is freely available to all persons with access to the internet in the UK (<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/cochrane.asp>). Further resources are required to improve utilisation and increase awareness of this important source of evidence among primary care physicians in the UK. ■

Acknowledgement

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