

Reflections on Undertaking the Cochrane Review: 'Acupuncture for Treating Fibromyalgia'

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A Cochrane review is a systematic review recognised internationally as being of the highest standard in evidence-based health care. Information generated from a Cochrane review is used by clinicians,

consumers, policy makers and other stakeholders to make informed decisions on the topic of focus.¹ Cochrane reviews are updated regularly and available free to all Australians. There are three stages

to a Cochrane review: title registration, protocol and the systematic review. Each stage has multiple steps and requires Cochrane's approval before the next stage can be commenced.

Significant steps of a Cochrane review

Title registration

- Register the title of the proposed review

Protocol

- Identify research questions
- Develop inclusion and exclusion criteria for publications
- Propose search strategies, including databases, types of publications
- Develop the methods for assessing the quality of included studies
- Develop methods of data extraction, data analysis and how to treat missing data
- Define comparison groups

Systematic review

- Identify potential papers
- Screen and assess papers for selection criteria
- Have foreign language papers translated by international experts within the Cochrane Collaboration or by local experts
- Extract data from included papers, undertake assessment and risk of bias
- Analyse data, generate forest plots, summary of findings table
- Write up the review

As part of our assessment process, we used a tool called Standards for Reporting Interventions in Clinical Trials of Acupuncture (STRICTA)² to evaluate the quality of our included papers. STRICTA are guidelines for journals and authors to use when

publishing their trials on acupuncture so others can reproduce them exactly. We created a grading system to improve the useability of STRICTA and give value to assessments. Unfortunately time was lost contacting authors to gain sufficient details to be able to fully assess

the included trials. Further evaluation required us to gauge the Risk of Bias³ in our included papers. After answering a number of questions, the Cochrane program generated a graph and a table that clearly showed where the risk of bias was in each paper.

We then went on to do the data presentation using 'Gradepo' and 'Summary of findings' tables. This area was new to us and took some time with much assistance from the Cochrane Musculoskeletal Group at Monash University, Victoria. Once complete, we proceeded with the final write-up of results and commentary which were then sent for initial assessment by the local Cochrane editor. However, we had exceeded our time allowed for a review and so under Cochrane instruction had to redo everything and add newly published papers.

Having redone the review our revised paper was peer reviewed by two editorial reviewers from Cochrane, two academics and a consumer advocate. We initially received conflicting comments which required negotiation to conclude the prolonged editorial process. Five years since the protocol development and our Cochrane review was published!

Looking back, when the opportunity arose to be part of a Cochrane review in my area of interest, I was excited about its prospects. Little did I realise what I was undertaking and the workload involved. The review went through many internal and external rounds of evaluation, which resulted in my developing a thicker skin for having my work critiqued. However, there is a certain amount of pleasure in completing something of this academic rigour and I have come away with a knowledge that couldn't be gleaned in any other way. Since being involved in this Cochrane review process, I have been invited to peer review papers for international journals in the area of complementary therapies and fibromyalgia.

Should you be considering a Cochrane Review, first ensure you have support from appropriate experts and co-authors. These people will be invaluable to you in all areas of your journey as they

were for me. My advice: write daily, keep your eyes peeled for new papers and don't give up.

References

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3. The Cochrane Collaboration (Internet), Melbourne: Australasian Cochrane Centre; [updated 2013; cited 2013 Oct 6]. Available from: <<http://ohg.cochrane.org/sites/ohg.cochrane.org/files/uploads/Risk%20of%20bias%20assessment%20tool.pdf>>