

# SOUTH AFRICAN COCHRANE CENTRE NEWSLETTER

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## A few words from the first director of the SACC

It is with sadness that I find myself writing 'a few words' for the South African Cochrane Centre (SACC) newsletter from my new office in Washington. In 1997 I was fortunate to receive the full support of the Medical Research Council in establishing the first Cochrane Centre on the African continent. As Director of the SACC during its first four years, I was privileged to always work with an enthusiastic and motivated team. Staff numbers grew from three to seven during this time and I am confident that the current team will continue to lead the Centre very ably into the twenty-first century. I would encourage the new leadership to focus on developing capacity and promoting evidence-based health care throughout Africa, while maintaining the strong collaborative partnerships the SACC has established internationally. In my new role as Director of Research and Analysis for the Global Health Council in Washington DC, USA, I will continue to promote the work of the SACC and will maintain a

keen interest in your doings. Farewell and thank you.

Jimmy Volmink  
Director of Research and  
Analysis  
Global Health Council  
Washington DC, USA.

*Jimmy Volmink (Right)  
relaxes after teaching at Makerere  
University, Uganda, May 2001*



### WHAT'S IN THIS ISSUE...

<b>Evidence-based Health Care and the Cochrane Collaboration</b>	Page 2
<b>Cochrane Library Training at SACC</b>	Page 3
<b>Ensuring that the needs of African consumers are addressed</b>	Page 4
<b>STOP PRESS – The HIV/AIDS Mentoring Programme</b>	Page 5
<b>The African Trials Register</b>	Page 6
<b>Evidence-based dentistry</b>	Page 6
<b>Capacity development at SACC</b>	Page 7
<b>The Cochrane Library on the Internet</b>	Page 7
<b>9th International Cochrane Colloquim</b>	Page 8
<b>SACC Training Workshops</b>	Page 8
<b>New Cochrane policy on updating reviews</b>	Page 8

# Evidence-based health care and the Cochrane Collaboration

It was my pleasure and privilege to be part of the 'April Road Show' of Cochrane Training and Awareness Raising Workshops. Towards the end of April, Elizabeth Pienaar, Nandi Siegfried, George Swingler and I conducted Cochrane awareness raising workshops in the four major centres of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Bloemfontein and Durban.

The route to Johannesburg was rather circuitous! As we were about to land at Johannesburg International Airport the pilot announced that our landing would be delayed for a few minutes due to a severe downpour. Alas, that was not to be! Within the next few minutes we were en route to Durban to refuel before returning to Johannesburg International Airport to disembark three hours after the scheduled time of arrival.

The workshops started with an interactive session on the strengths and weaknesses of evidence-based health care (EBHC), followed by a description of the principles of EBHC.

After morning tea, the nuts and bolts of the systematic review were dealt with. For many of the participants this was their first contact with the statistics necessary to understand and interpret Forest Plots.

This was followed by an interactive session entitled: *Is EBHC possible: Identifying obstacles and generating solutions*. The results of this interactive session are presently being analysed and some very interesting points are emerging. The problem of restricted access to the Cochrane Library was raised in all the workshops. South Africa is a 'low-resource' country and access to the Cochrane Library is costly. This is especially so for many of the state hospitals that run on very restricted budgets. Judging from the buzz, the questions, and the many small discussion groups which spontaneously arose during lunchtime, the morning sessions were enjoyed by all. The afternoon session started with a demon-

stration of the Cochrane Library followed by a 'hands-on' session which generated much enthusiasm for the practice of EBHC. Many of the participants brought their own laptop computers enabling us to keep the groups exploring the evaluation copies of the Cochrane Library to a minimum. It was a joy to see people composing advanced search strategies and successfully negotiating the Cochrane Library, Forest plots and all!

The last item on the agenda was a short description of the requirements for the preparation of a protocol for a Cochrane systematic review.

The workshops were attended by a broad spectrum of health professionals. There were representatives from both the public and private sector as well as from various academic institutions. Our goals were awareness raising and the recruitment of new Cochrane reviewers. We succeeded in both these goals and look forward to the next round of workshops.

Louise Spruyt  
Senior Scientist  
SACC



*Jimmy Volmink (Right) and participants at the April 2001 Cape Town workshop.*

# Cochrane Library Training at SACC



*Participants searching the Cochrane library (Durban)*

The South African Cochrane Centre (SACC) has been appointed as a distributor of the Cochrane Library in South Africa. This status also includes the responsibility for providing training and support to the users of the Cochrane Library.

Training workshops have been organised to fulfil this responsibility. The first of these was a very successful Satellite event during the 8th International Cochrane Colloquium in Cape Town in 2000. This was organised with the help of Carol Lefebvre, Information Specialist at the UK Cochrane Centre. Carol has been involved in searching within the Cochrane Collaboration since the very beginning so we were very grateful for her input.

Presentations at this event were truly international! Ruth Frankish, formerly Cochrane Library Trainer, NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, University of York, UK gave a presentation about the various databases included in the Cochrane Library. She also demonstrated how to search them all. Steve McDonald, Information Specialist, Australian Cochrane Centre demonstrated the use of the Reproductive Health Library. Louise Spruyt, Senior Scientist, SACC gave an introductory presentation on the Collaboration and SACC in particular.

In February 2001 it was decided that there is a definite need for similar workshops to be held in the major centres in South Africa. The workshops were planned for April 2001. Unfortunately they had to be run with only a South African presenter and no international input! The first workshop was at the University of Pretoria Medical Library. Librarians from both the University of Pretoria and the

Medical University of Southern Africa (MEDUNSA) attended this session.

The next stop on the road show was Bloemfontein. Here the presentation was given at the University of the Free State. The last venue was the Nelson R Mandela Medical School at the University of Natal. What made this workshop exciting is the fact that it was attended by librarians from both the Natal Technikon and the main library of the University of Natal.

Apart from the specialised workshops for librarians, demonstrations of the Cochrane Library were also done for the participants at the Cochrane Awareness Raising workshops held during April 2001.

It was very encouraging to learn from the librarians that there are lecturers in the Medical Schools who send their students to the library with the objective of finding and using the Cochrane Library. Feedback from the attendees has been very positive. They all now also know on which door to knock or which e-mail to bombard should they have a problem!

*Elizabeth Pienaar  
Information Scientist  
SACC*



*Participants searching the Cochrane library (Bloemfontein)*

# Ensuring that the needs of African consumers are addressed

The co-ordinator of the Cochrane Consumer Network Africa (CCNA), Samuel J. Ochieng, recently visited the South African Cochrane Centre (SACC) and held discussions with the SACC staff about activities of the Collaboration in Africa, particularly on issues relating to consumer participation.

The CCNA is an entity of the Cochrane Consumer Group and was established at the 8th International Colloquium held in Cape Town from 25 - 29 October 2000. The CCNA comprises consumers residing and working in African countries. The main objective of the CCNA is to develop and support Africa's consumer participation in the activities of the Cochrane Collaboration.

The need to strengthen Africa's consumer participation in the activities of the Cochrane Collaboration was identified in 1999 ahead of the 7th Cochrane Colloquium (held in Rome, Italy) through a consultation document, circulated and discussed by members through the convenor of the Consumer Network, Hilda Bastian. There were fears that African consumers were being left behind in the activities of the Cochrane Collaboration as attested by the Consumer Network's limited membership, participation and representation at previous colloquia. The first gathering of African members took place at the Rome Colloquium and members adopted an action plan to realise this dream. My election onto the Cochrane Collaboration Steering Group as a Consumer Representative acted as a major motivating factor to further strengthen Africa's consumer participation in the Collaboration. The action plan identified specific steps to achieve the main aims of the network :

- build the network;
- help build capacity in participation in the collaboration and research;
- encourage connections in the Collaboration and with partners; and,
- raise awareness of participation in, and use of, Cochrane reviews.

CCNA is in its initial phase of reorganisation on the long trek to making this vision a reality. We are yet to lay down

the necessary basic infrastructure, for example computers, telephone lines and the gathering of e-mail addresses that would facilitate communication among members. We will need to develop a database of all the activities in which our members are involved, identify their needs, such as training and capacity building, and make every effort to address them. We require support to enable us to find some office space, basic equipment and staff, among other things. We are in the process of mobilising support and we are glad that the SACC has shown the commitment to assist us in every way it can ... big or small!

CCNA is currently hosted by the Consumer Information Network (CIN), an independent national consumers' organisation founded in Kenya in 1994 whose mission is to empower consumers. This has mainly been achieved because of a commitment to the realisation of the objectives of the Consumer Network. This arrangement, I fear, is neither permanent nor conducive to us achieving our goal. We must strive to make the most effective use of the opportunity to guarantee CCNA a stable future and hence the need to embark on this ambitious plan.



*Samuel Ochieng (Bottom Right) meets with SACC staff.  
Back: Joy Oliver, Nandi Siegfried, Elizabeth Pienaar, Victoria Pillay, Jimmy Volmink, Bernadette Bredekamp  
Front: George Swingler*

In the medium term, we will launch the strategy to realise our objectives. Now that we have also agreed on the possible areas of co-operation with the South Africa Cochrane Centre, such as capacity building through training, etc. we will strive to nurture this and also aim for more co-operation with other potential collaborators.

Samuel Ochieng  
Chief Executive  
Consumer Information Network

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# STOP PRESS – The HIV/AIDS Mentoring Programme

## Why a mentoring programme?

At the Cochrane Colloquium in Cape Town last year, the South African Cochrane Centre (SACC) and the Cochrane HIV/AIDS Group agreed to develop a formal mentoring programme for African reviewers working on HIV-related reviews. The Cochrane HIV/AIDS Group, based at the University of California in San Francisco, recognised that many of their published reviews to date had a treatment focus with little relevance to developing countries where antiretroviral treatments are often not available. The collaborative HIV/AIDS mentoring programme therefore aims to increase capacity within Africa to produce reviews relevant to our setting.

## How does it work?

Interested reviewers working on HIV-related reviews are linked with a more experienced reviewer who can provide guidance and methods expertise throughout the review process. Where possible, mentor and reviewer meet on a monthly basis to discuss review progress, resolve methods issues and identify working objectives for the following month. If monthly meetings are not feasible, regular electronic contact is available. Since commencing the programme, we have found that new reviewers also require considerable assistance negotiating their way through the maze that makes up Cochrane process - from topic registration through to publication on the Cochrane Library!

## Who is responsible?

George Rutherford is the Review Group Editor of the HIV/AIDS Group. He is ably assisted by Gail Kennedy, Review Group Co-ordinator, and Maya Tholandi, Trial

Search Co-ordinator. Nandi Siegfried, Specialist Scientist at the SACC, is the Group's link-person in Cape Town and is responsible for the mentoring programme in Africa.

## Progress to date

Reviews currently receiving assistance from the Mentoring Programme include *Micro-nutrient supplementation in HIV-infected children and adults* (James Irlam & Marianne Visser), *Voluntary Counselling and Testing for HIV* (Thandiwe Sigxaxhe & Sphindile Magwaza), *Treatment for oral manifestations of HIV/AIDS* (Haly Holmes), *Circumcision for the prevention of HIV transmission in heterosexual men* (Nandi Siegfried & Martie Muller) and *Cotrimoxazole prophylaxis for opportunistic infections in adults with HIV* (Kate Grimwade and George Swingler).

All reviewers are encouraged to attend the Review Problem-solving sessions hosted by the SACC on the third Thursday of every month in the meeting room, 1st floor, C block, of the Medical Research Council in Cape Town from 10h00 – 12h00.

## How do I get involved?

If you are interested in participating either as a mentor or a reviewer in the programme, we would love to hear from you. Please contact Nandi on nsiegfri@mrc.ac.za.

PS: The SACC were delighted when Gail Kennedy gave birth to a baby girl, Amelia, on 5 April 2001. Congratulations Gail!

Nandi Siegfried  
Specialist Scientist  
SACC

# The African Trials Register

In poorer countries the shortage of resources paradoxically increases the need for reliable health care evidence, in order to prioritise the use of these scarce resources. However, comparatively little research on health interventions has been performed in poorer countries, and what has been performed is not always easily accessible.

To maximise the usefulness of existing information from clinical trials, The South African Cochrane Centre is assembling a register of controlled trials performed in Africa, including as much as possible of the 'lost science' that cannot be identified from large international electronic databases. These efforts include hand searching of African journals and searches of specific African databases such as the African Health Anthology and African Index Medicus. The African Trials Register will be a resource for researchers preparing systematic literature reviews, for whom a complete literature search is vitally important. The Register is available at

<http://www.sahealthinfo.org/Modules/Evidence-based/evidence-based.htm>. All identified trials will also be included on the Cochrane Collaboration Trials Register.

The African Trials Register also provides an opportunity to study patterns of research into health care interventions in Africa. This can identify gaps in existing research coverage, identify aspects of the quality and appropriateness of the research that require attention, and examine potential associations with trial quality and appropriateness (such as the source of funding and the nature of international collaboration). This research will also produce a paper archive of difficult-to-obtain articles that could be used by systematic reviewers.

*George Swingler*  
Senior Specialist Scientist  
SACC

## Evidence-based dentistry

As a child, I used to measure out my life in visits to the dentist – in the number of months till the next session of potential pain. It was thus with some foreboding that I sat in a room, alone, with seven dentists.

I was participating in a teaching module on evidence-based dentistry presented by the Department of Community Dentistry at the University of Stellenbosch. The South African Cochrane Centre (SACC) had supported Jeff Yengopal from the department in expanding its existing module on evidence-based dentistry for the MSc (Dental Health) course. Now I was in the lion's den, helping to present the module to students from both the Universities of Stellenbosch and the Western Cape. Nandi Siegfried and Elizabeth Pienaar from the SACC had helped with the design of the course and with the presentation.

Things went well. I lost my fear of dentists (temporarily), and we had fun. The participants were enthusiastic about the concepts and techniques we introduced, offered useful and interesting insights and asked some searching questions. They came from Namibia, Kenya, Uganda and Ghana, and were battling with the difficulties of providing health care in situations with little infrastructure, particularly with little or no electronic infrastructure. The 'digital divide' between rich and poor countries, with very little access to the information in poorer countries, remains a major challenge to effective health care generally and particularly to the electronic basis of the Cochrane Library.

The evidence-based module is part of a broader partnership between the Department of Community Dentistry and the SACC. Jeff Yengopal will also be working with the SACC on a Cochrane review, spending time on-site at the Centre. The aim of the partnership is to develop capacity within the Department of Community Dentistry to independently practise and teach an evidence-based approach and to be a focus both for the development of evidence-based dentistry and for the preparation of Cochrane reviews in oral health.

*George Swingler*  
Senior Specialist Scientist  
SACC

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# Capacity development at SACC

## Research Trainee Internship Programme

The Medical Research Council's (MRC) Research Trainee Internship Programme was initiated in 1996 when the MRC received a special grant from the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) for human resource development. The objective of making such a grant available was to provide financial resources to facilitate the process of bringing about racial equity within the organisation. Part of this grant was used to drive the Research Trainee Internship Programme which was committed to developing black researchers and black scientific managers.

## Why a research trainee programme for black graduates?

Historically, South Africa has trained from five to ten times more white than black postgraduates in the scientific fields. Research as a career was not an obvious choice for black school leavers and graduates mainly due to inequalities in the previous education system and inadequate financial resources. This programme creates an opportunity for promising young graduates to develop their skills, receive hands-on training and experience, and explore opportunities for pursuing a career as a researcher in the health sciences (extracted from the *MRC Research Training Internship Programme Policy Document*, 1998).

## 'Being a research trainee.....'

Being a young, black graduate with an honours degree in Medical Biochemistry, the Research Trainee Internship Programme has created the opportunity for me to be trained as a researcher under the close mentorship of Drs George Swingler and Jimmy Volmink at the South African Cochrane Centre. Working at the Centre has enabled me to explore and gain experience in the field of tuberculosis and research methods. Thus far, I have had the opportunity to network with the Cochrane Infectious Diseases Group and meet their editor, Paul Garner, as well as local TB researchers. The programme has also afforded me the opportunity to do a Masters in Public Health at the University of Cape Town. This course has provided me with the skills to undertake and complete a systematic review on the quality and reporting of all published clinical and public health research done on TB in South Africa over a five-year period. An article about this study has been submitted to the *Journal of the International Union Against Tubercle and Lung Disease* and is currently in press. I also hope to present a poster on the *Methodological quality and statistical power of randomized controlled trials of tuberculosis conducted in South Africa* at the 9th International Cochrane Colloquium in Lyon, France later this year. Currently I am conducting a Cochrane review on *Cough suppressants for Whooping Cough*.

Victoria Pillay  
Research Trainee  
SACC

## The Cochrane Library on the Internet

The Cochrane Library is the premier source of information used within the Cochrane Collaboration. It consists of not

only one, but several databases. Databases included are the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews; Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effectiveness; Cochrane Controlled Trials Register as well as the Cochrane Review Methodology Database.

Until now this resource has only been available through subscriptions. Now it may be accessed via the Medical Research Council's website free until March 2002. This facility is unfortunately only available to users with a South African email address.

Access is through the following URL:  
<http://www.sahealthinfo.org/Modules/Evidence-based/evidence-based.htm>

First time users will have to register to obtain an users ID and password for the database. It must also be pointed out that access to the database can be very slow. So for users who subscribe, you have a much faster access option!

The South African Cochrane Centre provides training and support in the use of the Cochrane Library.

For more information:  
[Elizabeth.Pienaar@mrcc.ac.za](mailto:Elizabeth.Pienaar@mrcc.ac.za)

## 9th International Cochrane Colloquium 9-13 October 2001, Palais des Congres, Lyon, France

### Important Dates

Notification of abstract acceptance	Closed
Early registration deadline	Closed
Full registration deadline	30 August 2001
Meeting request deadline	1 September 2001
Accommodation registration deadline	1 September 2001
Cancellation refund deadline	14 September 2001
Late registration deadline	1 October 2001
On-site registration	9-13 October 2001

### Target Audience

- Current contributors to the Cochrane Collaboration and potential contributors who have an interest in learning more about the Collaboration, and in participating in training workshops
- Potential partner organisations and institutions
- Health care providers and consumers interested in the application of reviews to health policies as well as patient care.

For more information, please visit the Colloquium website <http://www.cochrane-lyon.org>

## SACC training workshops

Date	Location	Type of workshop
7 September 2001	Cape Town	Awareness-raising
17 September 2001	Pretoria	Awareness-raising
18 September 2001	Pretoria	Help for reviewers (half day)
27 September 2001	Port Elizabeth	Awareness-raising

## New Cochrane policy on updating reviews

The Cochrane Collaboration Steering Group has now stated that Cochrane reviews should be updated at least once every two years. This framework also applies to protocols. Contact reviewers who have not updated their reviews with-

in the two years will no longer receive complimentary copies of The Cochrane Library ... until the update has been submitted.



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