New CEO transforming The Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration offices are small. If you have ever been to Summerstown in Oxford, United Kingdom, chances are you passed them without even knowing. Standing outside their modestly sized single-floor office makes you wonder just how they wield such clout.

As producers of over 5500 systematic reviews, with 500 paid staff and over 28 000 volunteers and contributors, the collaboration’s work is seen as an essential component of evidence-based medicine and health policy that helps guide doctors’ decision-making worldwide. Leading them is their recently appointed CEO, 49-year-old Mark Wilson.

Since coming to the position eight months ago, Wilson has been busy revamping Cochrane’s strategy. His current priority is establishing a team and expanding the central executive, with the aim of providing better support for members and increasing capacity to meet goals that will ultimately see more reviews people want, delivered in a timely manner.

“Organizationally, Cochrane realized after 20 years they need to professionalize as a major international organization,” says Wilson. “We are a vast organization, still being managed in an ad hoc hand-to-mouth sort of way. To be ready for the next 20 years, we need to be transformed.”

At the heart of the transformation remains the product — the Cochrane reviews — which Wilson holds in high esteem. What makes a Cochrane review so special compared to other systematic reviews, he says, is its methodological rigour and the high quality work of its many contributors.

Still, he is quick to point out obstacles that need to be overcome, one being the many months, sometimes years, that it takes some groups and authors to finish a review. “We have been criticized for that.” Cochrane is reviewing its production processes and looking at new ways to ensure standardization.

“Also, we’ve been accused of having high-quality output, but not answering the right questions that people are asking. Part of our quality-assurance processes should take this into account. If not, we’re something of a vanity exercise.”

Over the next five years, Cochrane will spend its $6.26-million reserve from general revenue, national licensing and institutional subscriptions on achieving these goals. Wilson says the Collaboration has been “prudent” about its operational costs, which has allowed it to set aside about $3.13 million a year, so it can “change and grow.”

With open-access publishing, these are critical times financially for the organization, but Wilson has lots of ideas, ranging from new products, such as systematic review summaries that will support our 28 000 people worldwide. Academics are not often good at strategic thinking, management and organizational issues. We needed someone to plug that gap.” — Neil Chanchlani MD, London, UK